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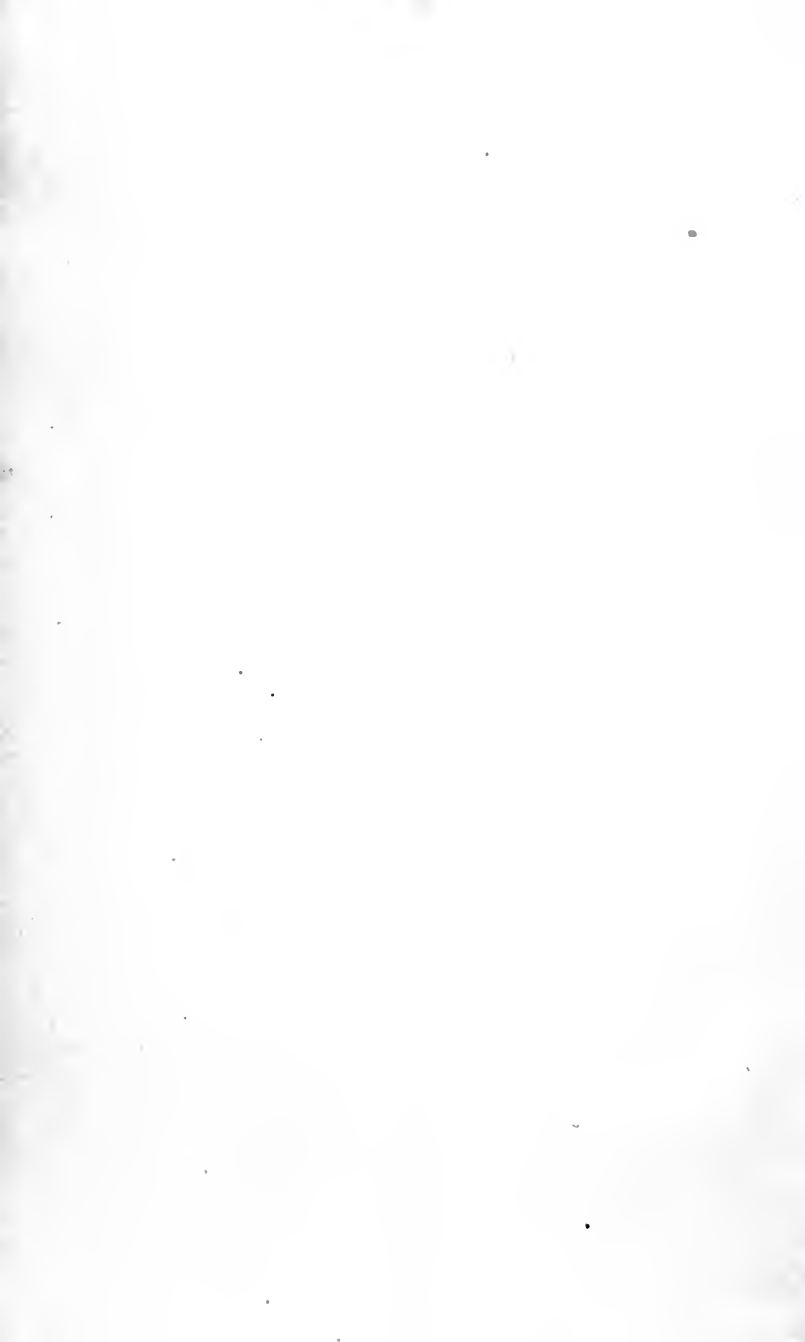


Meredith Nicholson

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ZELDA DAMERON





Zelda

ZELDA DAMERON

By

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

Author of *The Main Chance*

With 8 Drawings by ✓

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To the Memory of
My Father,
A Captain of Volunteers
In the Great War

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE RETURN OF ZELDA DAMERON	I
II OLD, UNHAPPY, FAR-OFF THINGS	20
III ZELDA RECEIVES A VISITOR	33
IV MR. MERRIAM MAKES SUGGESTIONS	40
V A POLITE REQUEST FOR MONEY	54
VI THE LOBSTER	60
VII A PRAYER FOR DIVINE GRACE	73
VIII OLIVE MERRIAM	80
IX A NICE LITTLE FELLOW	96
X THE RIVER ROAD	104
XI OVERHEARD BY EZRA DAMERON	113
XII JACK BALCOMB'S PLEASANT WAYS	121
XIII A REHEARSAL OF "DECEIVERS EVER"	136
XIV AN ATTACK OF SORE THROAT	146
XV J. ARTHUR BALCOMB RETREATS	157
XVI IN OLIVE'S KITCHEN	170
XVII DAMERON BLOCK, 1870	177
XVIII ZELDA LIFTS A BURDEN	189
XIX THE PATOKA FLATS	205
XX TWO GENTLEMEN BECOME ACQUAINTED	214
XXI "I BELIEVE I'M IN LOVE"	224
XXII RODNEY MERRIAM EXPLAINS	233
XXIII BRIGHTER VISTAS	245

XXIV	ONLY ABOUT DREAMS	255
XXV	A NEW ATTITUDE	273
XXVI	AN AUGUST NIGHT ADVENTURE	286
XXVII	MR. BALCOMB'S EASY CONSCIENCE	295
XXVIII	AMICABLE INTERVIEWS	310
XXIX	ZELDA FACES A CRISIS	323
XXX	"I WISH YOU WOULD NOT LIE TO ME"	333
XXXI	FACE TO FACE	343
XXXII	IN SEMINARY SQUARE	355
XXXIII	THE FIRST OF OCTOBER	364
XXXIV	A NEW UNDERSTANDING	375
XXXV	A SETTling OF ACCOUNTS	390
XXXVI	WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE	400

ZELDA DAMERON



ZELDA DAMERON

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF ZELDA DAMERON

"She's like Margaret; she's really one of us," remarked Mrs. Forrest to her brother. "She carries herself as Margaret did in her girlhood, and she's dark, as we all are."

"I hope she's escaped the Dameron traits; they're unattractive," said Rodney Merriam. "She's taller than Margaret; but Margaret was bent at the last,—bent but not quite broken."

Mrs. Forrest and Zelda Dameron, her niece, who were just home from a five years' absence abroad, had, so to speak, stepped directly from the train into Mrs. Carr's drawing-room. The place was full of women, old and young, and their animated talk blended in a great murmur, against which the notes of a few stringed instruments in the hall above struggled bravely.

Mrs. Carr was forcing the season a trifle—it was near the end of September—but the dean of a famous college for women had come to town unexpectedly, and it was not Mrs. Carr's way to let heat or cold interfere with her social inclinations. Mrs. Forrest and her brother had ceased talking to watch their niece. The

girl's profile was turned to them, and the old gentleman noted the good points of her face and figure. She was talking to several other girls, and it seemed to him that they showed her a deference. Mrs. Forrest was eager for her brother's approval, and Rodney Merriam was anxious to be pleased; for the girl was of his own blood, and there were reasons why her home-coming was of particular interest to him.

Rodney Merriam was annoyed to find that he must raise his voice to make his sister hear him, and he frowned; but there was a quaver about his lips and a gentle look in his black eyes. He was a handsome old gentleman, still erect and alert at sixty. His air of finish and repose seemed alien, and he was, indeed, a departure from the common types of the Ohio Valley. Yet Rodney Merriam was born within five minutes' walk of where he stood.

Zelda turned from her companions suddenly, followed by their laughter at something she had been describing. She crossed swiftly to her uncle with a happy exclamation:

"This is indeed an occasion! Behold my long-lost uncle!" She seized his hands eagerly. "We mustn't be introduced; but you'd never know me!"

She looked at him admiringly. Their eyes met almost at a level and the eyes were very like.

"I'm afraid that is so! And you are Zelda—our little Zee!"

"Quite that! We must be acquainted! Perhaps we shall be friends, who knows? Aunt Julia promised to arrange it,—and I'm not used to being disappointed."

Zelda was a name that had been adopted in the Mer-

riam family long ago, though no one knew exactly how. Now and then some one sought in the Bible for light on the significance of the name and sought in vain; but there always remained for such the consoling reflection that Zelda sounded like the Old Testament anyhow. Zelda Dameron's grandmother Merriam, for whom she was named, had always been called Zee. There had been something abrupt and inadvertent about Mrs. Merriam that the single syllable seemed to express. A great many people had never known that old Roger Merriam's wife's name was Zelda, so generally was Zee applied to her even in her old age. And in like manner the same abbreviation was well adapted to the definition and description of her granddaughter. Margaret Dameron's child had been called Little Zee while her grandmother lived, and until her aunt had taken her away; and now, on her reappearance in Mariona, she was quite naturally spoken of as Zee Dameron, which seemed appropriate and adequate.

Her voice was unusually deep, but it was clear and sweet. She was very dark, like themselves, as Mrs. Forrest had said. There was a wistfulness in the girl's eyes that touched Rodney Merriam by the suggestion of her dead mother, the sister that had been the pride of the Merriams. Mrs. Forrest watched her brother curiously. She had speculated much about this meeting, and had planned it for her own house. But her brother had been away from town on her arrival a week before. Rodney Merriam was away from home a great deal; his comings and goings were always unexpected. He had reached Mariona at noon from a trip into Canada, and had gone to Mrs. Carr's in pursuit of his sister. Mrs. Forrest un-

derstood perfectly that her brother had come to Mrs. Carr's tea chiefly that he might casually, and without apparent interest, inspect his niece. He was a Merriam, and the Merriams did things differently, as every one in Mariona knew. Rodney Merriam was wary of entanglements with his relatives; he had broken with most of them, and he did not intend to be bored by any new ones if he could help it. He and Mrs. Forrest were, it was said in Mariona, the only Merriams who could safely be asked to the same table, or who were not likely to cause embarrassment if they met anywhere. He had not spoken to Ezra Dameron, Zelda's father, for ten years, and the name Dameron was an offense in his nostrils; but the girl was clearly a Merriam; she was the child of his favorite sister, and he hoped it would be possible to like her.

"Yes, we shall be friends—much more than friends," he said kindly.

"You must come and see me; Aunt Julia has graduated me, and I'm back on my native heath to stay. I shall come to see you. I used to like your house very much, Uncle Rodney. It's a trifle austere, as I remember, but we can change all that."

There was a subdued mirth in her that pleased him; it had been a conclusion of his later years that young girls lacked spirit and humor; they were dull and formal, and talked inanely to old people. Zelda promised better things, and he was relieved.

"Come and tell me what you have learned in distant lands,—and I'll tell you what to forget! I'm not sure that your Aunt Julia has been a safe preceptress. And as you're going to live in Mariona I must, as the saying is, 'put you on'."

"That isn't right. You should say, 'put you next,'—a young American told me so in Paris."

"Maybe my slang isn't up to date. I'll accept the Paris amendment. Was the young man handsome?"

"Not very. He was introducing threshing machines into France. Can you imagine Millet doing an American thresher with cowed peasants grouped about it? How perfectly impossible it would be, *mon oncle!*"

Tcas in Mariona were essentially feminine, but a few young men had appeared, and one of them now came toward the trio.

"Here's Morris Leighton; I want you to know him, Zee," said Rodney Merriam.

Merriam greeted the young man cordially, and said as he introduced him:

"Mr. Leighton's getting to be an old citizen, Julia. It isn't his fault if you don't know him."

"I don't know any one any more," said Mrs. Forrest, plaintively. "I've been away so much. But I'm going to stay at home now. They say the malaria isn't troublesome in Indiana any more."

"Not half as bad as in your chosen Italy," her brother answered.

"And it doesn't seem new here at all,—the buildings down-town really look old," said Zelda.

"The town's old enough; it's ancient; it's older even than I am!"

"He's very young to be an uncle," declared Leighton. "He's really the youngest man we have. If you're the long-exiled niece, I must confess my amazement, Miss Dameron. I had the impression that you weren't grown up."

"That wasn't fair, Uncle Rodney. You ought to have prepared the way for me better than that."

"You'll do very well for yourself. I'll walk down with you when you go, Morris."

Merriam moved away through the crowd, followed by his sister, who wished to get him aside to question him. She had planned that her brother should now share her responsibility; she saw that he liked the girl; but this would not serve unless she caught him with his guard still down and compelled him to admit it.

"You know Uncle Rodney very well, don't you?" said Zelda to Leighton. "It must be very well, because I've already heard that; so I may grow jealous. I'd forgotten he was so splendid. He was always my hero, though. When I was a little girl I used to sit on a trunk in his garret and watch him fence with a German fencing master. It was great fun. Uncle Rodney was much better than the master, and I applauded all his good points."

"The applause was certainly worth working for. I sometimes fence with Mr. Merriam myself. I assure you that his hand and eye have not lost their cunning. But we lack spectators!"

"I'm too big for the trunk now, so you'll have to get along. Is that all you do,—play at fighting?"

"No; when my adversary gets tired, he talks to me."

"Oh! he's tired, then, before the conversation begins. Perhaps it's safer—that way!"

She hesitated before speaking the last words of her sentences with an effect that was amusing.

"I'm a pretty bad fencer; I wasn't prepared for that."

"It's wise always to be on guard. They teach that, I think, in the schools."

"I wish you'd tell me something to say to the guest of honor. Is she a Protestant deaconess, a temperance reformer, an educator, or what? I have to say something to her before I go."

"Quite between ourselves, I don't know what she is," said Zelda, "and I don't care; but if my judgment is worth anything, her things—clothes—the *tout ensemble*—are charming. You might tell her we like her raiment and ask for a card to her tailor. There are some old ladies over there that I remember dimly,—I must go and speak to them. Please say a good word to Uncle Rodney about me, if you can—conscientiously."

She left him with a quick little nod and slipped away into the crowd.

Morris Leighton's social adventures had not lacked variety, as a young western American's experiences may go. He knew a good deal about girls, or thought he did; and while a young man is still under thirty the delusion serves all the purposes of actual knowledge. Rodney Merriam had often spoken to Leighton of Zelda Dameron's home-coming, but with his habitual reserve in referring to family matters. There was, of course, no reason why he should have made any point of discussing his niece with a young man who had never seen her. The Merriams were not like the usual run of simple, wholesome, bread-and-butter folk who gave the social and intellectual note to Mariona; and Morris, in his slight knowledge of all of them except Rodney, doubtless thought them much more unusual than they were.

His eyes followed Zelda, and in a moment he caught a glimpse of her profile. He had been wondering of whom she reminded him; and as he joined a group of young women who were stranded in a corner, he suddenly remembered. There flashed before him, vividly, a portrait that hung in Rodney Merriam's house in Seminary Square. It was natural to attribute all manner of romance to Rodney Merriam; and Leighton had accepted the local tradition of an unfortunate early love affair which had, as many people held, affected the whole current of Merriam's life. But the mystery that Morris had constructed from the quaint old portrait of the dark lady with gentle eyes was now dispelled. The dark lady was clearly Rodney Merriam's sister, and the mother of Zelda Dameron. The talk of the young women did not interest Morris, and he kept glancing about in search of Zelda. He could not find her, and this vexed him so that he gave the wrong reply to a question one of the young women put to him; and they laughed at him disconcertingly.

Zelda Dameron's return to Mariona was more of an event than she herself understood. The Merriams were an interesting family; they were, indeed, one of the first families. There were Merriams about whom people laughed cynically; but Mrs. Forrest did not belong to this faction, nor did Rodney Merriam, of whom most people stood in awe. There had been much speculation, in advance of Zelda's coming, as to her probable course when she should return to Mariona with her aunt. Many had predicted that she would not go to live with her father—that Mrs. Forrest and Rodney Merriam would save her from that; but Zelda was already domiciled in her

father's house. The word had gone forth that she was very foreign. Many who spoke to her this afternoon merely to test for themselves the truth of this report decided that her clothes, at least, had the accent of Paris.

Mrs. Forrest led her brother to an alcove of Mrs. Carr's library, and sent him to bring a cup of tea to her there. She was afraid to wait for a better opportunity; she must take advantage of his first impression at once. He brought what was offered at the buffet in the dining-room, and gave her his serious attention.

"This isn't quite the place I should have chosen for a reunion after three years," he began. "Where was it I saw you last? Geneva? I believe it was. The girl is very handsome. I suppose you found your house in good order. And Zee went with you without any trouble? That's as it should be."

"But, Rodney, she isn't with me! I couldn't persuade her—"

"You mean to say that—"

"She has gone to her father; she wouldn't have it any other way."

Rodney Merriam's face darkened.

"Gone to her father, has she? It's a mistake. I'm disappointed; but it's my fault. I didn't know you were coming so soon, or I should have met you in New York. I wanted to make sure she had shaken him off,—that she had forgotten him, if possible."

"Well, she hadn't, and you couldn't have done anything if you had met us. She had written to him all the time we were away, and he had always acknowledged her letters. I suppose there may be something in the filial instinct one reads of in books."

"It's possible,"—and Merriam smiled a trifle grimly. "Of course, she hasn't decided yet. She'll change her mind about him. A few days with Ezra Dameron will be enough."

He was greatly annoyed. He had looked forward for a year to Zelda's home-coming. He had planned to save her from the ignominy of contact with her father; and now he had failed completely through an absence which he could not justify in his own conscience. There had been no very good reason why he should go to the Muskoka Lakes just at the time he had chosen, except that there was nothing else to do; and his sister had sent him no preliminary hint of her immediate return. He felt that, between them, he and Mrs. Forrest had made a sorry mess of it.

"She's gone home. That fact is settled," said Mrs. Forrest, glad that the worst had now been made known to him.

The music ceased, and Rodney Merriam could talk without shouting.

"Oh! I'll fix that," he said. "I'll get her away from him."

"I should be very glad to have you try,"—and Mrs. Forrest smiled slightly. Though she feared her brother's displeasure, she nevertheless found a secret joy in his fallibility. He was not tolerant of other people's errors, and it was gratifying to know that matters did not always run smoothly for him any more than for other human beings.

"If I were you," she said presently, "I shouldn't try to do anything about it. Zelda is not a child. We have no right to assume that Ezra won't treat her well.

And her father's house is the proper place for her. We know that he's an unpleasant person, but many of his fellow townsmen think him a paragon of virtue. Between us, we ought to manage to keep her a good deal to ourselves."

"I don't like it! I don't like it at all!"

"But you'd better make the best of it. It wasn't so easy to arrange as you think, and the situation has embarrassments either way. We don't know her father. It's been many a day since I set eyes on him."

"Well, you may be right," he said after a moment's reflection. "Now that you've given her to him, I suppose I'll have to take a hand," said Merriam, with frank displeasure. "I'll have to renew my acquaintance with that blackguard. I really suppose I'll have to call on him, or I might meet him accidentally, in the street, or at the bank. I might make a study of his habits and then lie in wait. I should like to give an accidental air to the meeting, to save my self-respect as far as possible."

There was in Merriam's voice an even, hard tone that was not wholly pleasant; but his sister laughed.

"I suppose I might give a reconciliation dinner," she said. "We might as well go into it deep while we are about it."

Merriam shrugged his shoulders. "Don't push matters too fast. I don't remember Ezra as a good dinner man."

He rested his arm upon a low book-case, looking down at his sister as she talked and drank her tea. It was quiet in their corner; the murmur of talk in the other rooms reached them faintly. Several times other guests came to the door and looked in on them and went away wondering, or perhaps saying to their friends that Mrs.

Forrest and her brother, old Rodney Merriam, were holding a family council in the library, and that very likely it was about Zee Dameron.

"I've never asked you about her money," said Mrs. Forrest. "There ought to be a good deal of it. I hope our stay abroad didn't cut into it too much—"

"It didn't cut into it at all. I think I told you when you went away with Zee that I should care for the expenses. I really intended telling Ezra that he must pay the bills; but I waited until after you had gone, and then it seemed much easier to pay them myself than to see him. She has just so much more money coming to her, and I only hope she'll get it."

"That's like you, Rodney. I've never talked to her about her money. She thinks her father paid the bills. Her money's safe enough. Ezra isn't exactly a spend-thrift!"

"No, the brute! I hope he'll give her enough to eat now."

"Her going there is only an experiment; I shan't be surprised if she gives it up. We must stand by her, Rodney. We haven't any of our own. And she's worth it,—worth it even for her own sake if it weren't for—"

"Yes, certainly. She needs no apology. You've done very well. She does you credit. You may count on me for anything I can do for her,—or for you," he added cordially. "I'm glad you're at home again, and I'd hoped to get some cheer out of Zee. I'm tired of wandering; and I even get tired of myself and my own house. I wish I had your eternal youth, Julia!"

She was short and stout, and there was infinite good-nature in her dark face. She was an indolent woman,

who had always taken life easily. Her hair, once very black, was now whitening fast. She had been abroad in the world a good deal, and knew where the best shops were in Vienna and Paris, Munich and Dresden; and she cared more about Italian politics than the politics of her own country. It was reported periodically that Julia Forrest, who had long been a widow, was about to marry some titled foreigner, but while these rumors always proved untrue, they served to keep alive the traditional interesting qualities of the Merriams.

"I'll take you home if you're ready," said Mrs. Forrest, when, after some further talk, they returned to the drawing-room. "Zelda's father is coming for her."

"Thanks; but I'm going to walk down with Leighton, if I can find him."

"Who is he?—should I remember him?—the name—"

"You never saw him before; but—he's the son of his father. It's the same name. He's a youngster I've picked up. The boy came here from the country to go into the law. He's a graduate of Tippecanoe College—my college and his father's."

"He's very good-looking; is he anything else?"

"I hope so; I think so. I'll send him around to pay his respects. He must know you."

It was nearly six o'clock, and a procession of women was coming down the stairs to Mrs. Carr's front door, as Rodney Merriam and Morris Leighton left the house with Mrs. Forrest and Zelda. The waiting carriages made a long line in the street.

"How gay it looks! The old town really has a metropolitan air at last. A tea—with men present—it's almost beyond belief!"

"The town's not so bad, Julia ; and it's a nice comfortable place for one's old age. You'd better get reconciled."

Mrs. Forrest's carriage had drawn up to the curb and Leighton shut her into it.

"Be sure to come to my house to-morrow, Zee," she called to the girl.

"Miss Dameron's carriage !"

A shabby vehicle emerged from the line and came forward. Zelda and Leighton were talking animatedly together ; and Merriam watched the approaching carriage with interest, standing back from the curb. It was a box-like, closed carriage of an old pattern, drawn by one horse, with the driver mounted on a low seat in front. Leighton opened the door.

"Shall I say home?" Morris asked, as the girl gathered up her skirts and stepped in.

"You needn't trouble yourself," said the driver, sharply. He was muffled in a heavy coat, though the air was warm, and as the carriage door closed, he struck his horse with the reins and drove rapidly away.

"Sorry I made a mistake," said Leighton to Merriam, as they turned toward the city.

"It was her father," said Merriam.

"Yes ; I hadn't noticed him."

They walked slowly toward the city, the man of sixty and the man of twenty-five. Mariona was proud of High Street, which was, so to speak, the equator from which the local social latitude was reckoned. The maples that overhung it were not the product of haste, but stood for the foresight of remote yesterdays in which the early comers had planted hopefully for the to-morrows that

had now arrived. New-fallen leaves were crisp under foot, and the sound of sweepers at work on walks and lawns and the keen tang of leaf-smoke proclaimed the reign of autumn to urban senses. There were not, in the whole length of the street, a dozen houses that were worth considering architecturally, but while there was nowhere luxury, there was everywhere comfort; and the main thing in life is not, after all, to make a show.

Mariona is, to be frank about it, the capital of an Ohio Valley state whose vote in national elections—never “reliably” the asset of any party—has long been essential to the winner in the electoral college. Its early settlers were drawn from two distinct types at the seaboard,—from Virginia and North Carolina on the one hand, from the Middle States and New England on the other. The new type thus formed had sent a king’s host to die in the Civil War; but in civic matters it was, in the usual American fashion, long-suffering and slow to wrath, and continued so to the yesterday of which this tale is written.

The Merriams had come out of New England, and they had come early, when Mariona was still a village in the wilderness and long before the first railroad had connected it with the Ohio. The original Merriam had left a large family when he died. He was a man of ability, and if his children had not all prospered, it was through no fault of his own; for it was clear from an examination of the county records that he had in early days owned, or held liens upon, much of the soil of Mariona. Old Roger Merriam had been dead many years, but of his children four remained. Of these Rodney Merriam had never married; Mrs. Forrest was a

widow and childless; and they were the only Merriams whose names ever appeared among the society items of the Mariona papers. Another son of Roger Merriam was a merchant, and still another had been a lawyer. They had spent the money left them by their father, and owing to difficulties whose origin Mariona had forgotten, these brothers had broken with each other. Rodney Merriam had dropped both of them in disgust at their quarrel, and Mrs. Forrest, as usual, followed Rodney's lead; so it had come to pass that the house of Merriam was divided against itself, and as far as the appraisement of Mariona went, the better half stood.

Rodney Merriam had never done any of the things which the men and women of his generation had expected him to do; he had, on the other hand, done many things that seemed utterly inexplicable. He had, like most men of his generation in Mariona, served in the Civil War; but the easiest known way of irritating Rodney Merriam was to give him a military title. He had a particularly stony stare for the person who called him colonel; the individual who dared to call him general was in danger of his life. At the close of the war Merriam disappeared for two years, and no one knew where he spent that period, though there were stories afloat that he had continued his soldiering in one part of the world or another. When he reappeared, he gave no account of himself; and after a year, in which he renewed old acquaintances and friendships, he again left Mariona, to return after Sedan, followed by a generally credited story that he had fought on the losing side in the Franco-Prussian War.

The fact that elderly men in Mariona usually dressed

in black did not deter Rodney Merriam from wearing, when he pleased, the extreme thing in English tweeds; he had a weakness for bright scarfs and tied them well. He owned a great variety of walking-sticks, and used them in a certain order known only to himself. He never in any circumstances carried an umbrella; he never rode in a street car, and he never talked business. Before the lean years of the seventies, when most of his family connections lost their money, he reduced all his property, except the High Street house, to cash, which he invested in England.

Rodney Merriam had driven his father's cows to pasture through upper High Street, and he felt a proprietary interest in the whole of the exclusive mile that lay between Mrs. Carr's residence and the business district. It was his influence that kept the street free from asphalt; the new-comers who had extended the thoroughfare and carried its sacred name far countryward might have anything they liked; but he had drawn a dead line within which wooden blocks should forever prevail. He walked or rode every day the full length of the block-paved part of the street, for he loved the town—the old town, as he called it, though the state itself had not reached its centenary—with a love that is possible only in those who have been linked to the beginnings of a community. No matter how many of his townsmen held otherwise, there was, after all, a good deal of sentiment in Rodney Merriam.

Merriam's plain brick house faced south on Seminary Square, a pretty park in which there had once been an academy in the boyhood days of Rodney Merriam. There was a plot of grass at the front and side of his house, which was inclosed by an iron fence.

"You'd better come in and stay to dinner," said the old gentleman to Morris Leighton, as they reached the gate. "The jump from a live tea to a solitary dinner is almost too abrupt for me."

He drew out his latch-key and opened the door, and Leighton followed him into the hall.

"I mustn't stop; I must bolt my bite down-town and go to work."

Merriam put aside his coat and hat and went into the library. The ceilings of the house were high and the hall was wide. The woodwork was black walnut. The library was clearly a man's abiding place; its deep leather chairs and broad heavy table suggested the furniture of a club. Here again was black walnut—table, chairs and book-cases, as though the great trees of the mixed forests that had once stood on the site of the town had turned into furniture so that they might, even with a loss of dignity, prolong the tenure of their native soil.

Leighton turned over the periodicals that lay on the table.

"You saw my niece up there, didn't you?" asked Merriam, peering into his tobacco jar.

"Yes; oh, yes!" The question was superfluous, as Rodney Merriam had himself introduced Leighton to Zelda Dameron; and Merriam was not forgetful. Leighton threw down the magazine whose table of contents he had been scanning.

"She's stunning, isn't she? I wasn't quite prepared for it."

"Of course she's stunning. I'd like to know what you expected. She's the finest girl in the world!"

"I can't deny it. I suppose she'll be about a good deal from now on. I hope you'll allow me to break a lance in her behalf."

"It can probably be arranged, if you're good. You'd better cultivate Mrs. Forrest. She's a friend worth having. You know Zee's father when you see him?"

"Yes; Mr. Carr's his lawyer. He comes to the office once a month, at least. He's an odd sort, isn't he? He has a standing appointment with Mr. Carr for the first of every month, and he's always there when the curtain rises."

"I believe Ezra always was an early bird. You'd better stay to dinner, Morris."

A Japanese boy in a white jacket appeared at the door and bowed jerkily from the hips.

"No, thanks; the poor barrister must work when he gets a chance. I'll be around soon, though, to get the story of your adventures in Canada."

"I suppose I must harden my heart against you. There'll be a lobster as usual, Sunday evening. Good night."

Merriam heard the click of the iron gate as he stood meditating. Then he took up a bit of paper from his table and wrote:

"October 1; see Ezra."

The Japanese boy bowed again in the door, and Rodney Merriam went out to his lonely dinner.

CHAPTER II

OLD, UNHAPPY, FAR-OFF THINGS

"The cost of living is high, very high."

"Yes, father; I know that things cost, of course."

"I have lived on very little while you were away, Zee. With one servant it's possible to keep down expenses. Servants are ruinous. And I'm not rich, Zee, like your Aunt Julia and Uncle Rodney."

"I want to do just what you would have me do, in everything. It was kind and generous of you to let me stay away so long. I know my expenses abroad must have been a great tax on you."

Ezra Dameron looked quickly at his daughter.

"Yes, to be sure, Zee, to be sure. Mariona is a simple place and your sojourn abroad has hardly fitted you for our homely ways. You'll find that things are done very differently here. But of course you will accommodate yourself to the conditions. And you'll find the house quite comfortable. It's a little old-fashioned, but it was your grandfather's, and it rarely happens nowadays that a girl lives in the same house her mother was born in. Of course any little changes that you want to make will be all right; but you must practise economy."

They were studying each other with a shrewd sophistication on the father's side; with anxious wonder on the

part of the girl. She knew little of her father. Even the memory of her mother had grown indistinct. The thing that had always impressed her about her father was his seeming age; she remembered him from her childhood as an old man, who came and went on errands which had seemed unrelated to her own life. The house had stood in a large tract when Zelda went away, but this had shrunk gradually as Ezra Dameron divided the original Merriam acres and sold off the lots. The front door of the homestead was now only a few feet from the new cement walk on what was called Merriam Street, in honor of Zelda's grandfather. Sun and wind had peeled the paint from the brick walls and the green of the blinds had faded to a dull nondescript.

The house, without its original setting of trees and grass, was somber and ugly. A few cedars remained, but they only intensified the gloom of the place. The house had been built like a fortress and was old before the Civil War. It was a large house, or had been considered so, with several levels of floors marking the additions that had been made from time to time by the elder Merriam. There was a small iron balcony in front, opening from the upper windows; but it seemed ridiculous now that it hung over the public walk. At the rear there was a broad wooden gallery with pillars rising to the second story. A high board fence surrounded the back of the lot, as though to guard from further encroachment the few feet of earth that remained of the ampler acres of a bygone day. The house had fallen to Mrs. Dameron in the division of Roger Merriam's estate, and she had willed it to her daughter, making it part of the property held in trust for Zelda by her father.

Mrs. Forrest liked the good things of life and spent her money generously to get them. She avoided discomfort at any cost, and Zelda's ideas of living had naturally been derived in a considerable degree from her aunt. The transition from their pleasant quarters in Dresden, Florence and Paris to the grim living-room in Merriam Street was too abrupt. A wave of loneliness swept over the girl as she sat with her father in the stiff sitting-room, before the cramped little grate where a heap of burning anthracite gleamed like a single hot coal. Back of them was a table, covered with a faded felt cloth, and on it lay a few newspapers, a magazine, a religious weekly, and an old copy of the Bible, in which Ezra Dameron read a chapter twice a day. He was ill at ease now as he talked to his daughter. He felt that she was a stranger who had come to break in upon the orderly course of his life. He had believed sometimes during her absence that he needed her, that he was lonely and wished to have her back; but the photographs that she had sent home had not prepared him for the change in her. He had expected a child to return, but here was a woman, with a composure, a poise, that were disconcerting. Even her voice, her way of speaking, troubled him. She had tried to tell him fully of her life while away, to create the atmosphere of it for him; but she had only widened the margin between what he could know and what he could not be made to understand.

The girl felt for a moment that she could not stay, that it was more than she could bear. Her fingers were clasped upon her knees. She sat very straight in a hard unyielding chair that seemed to share the austerity of the whole house. She wished at that moment to escape—



Mrs. Forrest

there was no other word for it—and run away to her aunt or uncle. Why were they alone here, these two, she and this difficult old man? Why had she not gone to Mrs. Forrest's to live? It had grown suddenly colder at sundown and the wind swept dolorously through the cedars that brushed the side of the house. Why did not some one come? Why did not her uncle come for her? Carriages passed now and then with the smart beat of hoofs on the asphalt, so near that the sounds might have come from a remote room of the dreary house.

"Your aunt probably told you something of your business affairs,—of the trusteeship."

Her thoughts had been far away; he watched her with a shrewd smile as she turned quickly toward him.

"Oh, no! Aunt Julia never discussed it; but I remember that she told me once I had some property. I know nothing more—except that there is a trusteeship—whatever that is!" And she laughed.

"Yes; it was a very wise idea of your mother's in providing for you. She always maintained her separate estate. She inherited some property from her father,—you may have known."

"No, I didn't know, but I always supposed grandfather Merriam was rich."

"I never touched your mother's property at all; never a cent," the old man went on. He did not know what Mrs. Forrest might have told Zelda. He was dropping down his plummet to measure her ignorance. Zelda knew nothing; and she cared very little. Her wants had always been provided for without any trouble on her part. Mrs. Forrest indulged herself, and she had indulged Zelda. Ezra Dameron was wondering just what

Rodney Merriam and Mrs. Forrest would expect him to do for the girl. His position as her father had been anomalous ever since his wife died, ten years ago. The Merriams had taken his daughter away from him at once and then they had sent her out of the country, and now that they had brought her back he was not without curiosity as to what their attitude toward him would be.

"The trusteeship will not be terminated for a year—on your twenty-first birthday, unless you should marry before the end of that time. This is always an emergency to look forward to; but I trust you will be in no hurry to leave me."

He looked at her again in his quick, nervous way. His voice showed the first hint of the whine of senility.

Zelda laughed abruptly.

"It's funny, isn't it?—the getting married. I honestly hadn't thought of it before. I don't know any young men. We didn't meet any men abroad except very old ones. Aunt Julia was afraid the young men weren't respectable!"

"There's nothing like being careful where young men are concerned. There are many bad ones about these days. The temptations of modern life are increasing fast. A young girl can have no idea of them."

"Who's afraid?" she said, and laughed again.

He tried to laugh; he was making an effort to be friendly, to accommodate himself to his daughter's ways, to understand her if he could.

The girl rose and walked restlessly about the room, picking up and throwing down the papers on the table; and then she examined several steel engravings on the walls. She had been at home a week, but the place was still unfamiliar.

A plate of apples had been placed on the table, and presently the old man took a knife and began paring one carefully. The girl paused in her restless wandering about the room, and turned to watch him. He had ceased trying to talk to her. There was something of pathos in his bent figure as he sat peeling the apple. She watched him silently, touched by his weight of years, and the feeling of loneliness left her suddenly. It had seemed hard and difficult at first, but it was only a kind of homesickness; this was home, and this was her father. There were things about him that moved her pity. His clothes were scrupulously neat; his linen was clean and his collar was carefully turned down over a high cravat, suggesting the stock of another time. His gray hair was long, and fell down on his coat, but it was carefully brushed.

Zelda went over and stood by him, and he looked up at her and smiled,—an impersonal, martyr-like smile.

"They look good, father. If you don't mind I'll get a knife and try one. It's been a long time since I ate an apple."

She brought herself a plate and knife from the pantry, and sat down near him. A gentler impulse had taken hold of her. She owed her father honor and respect; he was an old man, and at his age men were entitled to their whims. She won him to a more companionable mood than she had known in him before.

"I remember, father, a queer old table service that used to be here,—very heavy pieces, with a curious, big flower pattern. I haven't seen it about anywhere; but I haven't done much looking. Probably Polly knows where it is."

"To be sure. I seem to remember it. It's probably in the attic. The attic's full of things."

"I should like to explore it. I remember attics very pleasantly from my youth. There was Uncle Rodney's. He always had the most curious things in his garret."

"Yes, yes. Rodney is a very strange man."

He looked at her sharply; evidently the girl did not understand the idiosyncrasies of the family relationship. Julia Forrest, his sister-in-law, was a more discreet woman than he had imagined.

"But about the attic,—I'll give you the basket of keys, Zee, just as your mother left it. There is probably much rubbish that ought to be thrown away. No doubt there are things that might be given to the poor." He bowed his head almost imperceptibly, as though in humble acknowledgment of all the beatitudes. Zelda took his plate and he rose and left the room. He walked lightly, and with an elastic step that was out of keeping with his appearance of age.

"I'll be back in a moment," he called, and he went up stairs, returning presently, carrying a small basket filled with keys.

"These are yours, my daughter," he said, and waved his hand with a little touch of manner.

"Oh, so many!" She poured the keys upon the table. There were half a hundred of them, of many kinds and sizes; and they were all tagged with little bits of ivory, on which their several uses were written clearly in ink.

"Your mother was very methodical,—very painstaking—"

He shook his head and turned to the fire, as though to hide any show of feeling.

Zelda was turning the keys over in her hand, and she

did not look at him. A mist had come into her eyes. She remembered the dark woman who had been so gentle and patient with her childhood. They used to walk together in the old pasture; and they carried their books to a seat that had been built under a great beech where her mother read the quaint tales and old ballads that were her delight. These were the only happy memories she had kept of her mother—the times under the beech, with which her father was not associated.

"I'm sure it's your time to go to bed, father. You mustn't let me break in on your ways." Zelda walked over to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "I want to be very good to you, father; and I know we'll live here very happily. You won't mind me much—when you get used to me!"

She touched his forehead with her lips.

"Thank you, thank you,"—and there was a helpless note in his voice.

She turned away from him quickly, restored the keys to the basket and ran with it to her room.

The next morning she was down to his seven o'clock breakfast in the cold, forbidding dining-room. She was very gay and made him talk a great deal to her. He had been up for an hour at work in the barn, where he cared for his own horse. He carried the morning newspaper to the table, as he had done for years.

"This will never do, father! You must talk to me and help me to learn the American breakfast habit. I'll be lonesome if you read at the table."

His thoughts seemed far away; he had long been out of practice in the amenities and graces, and the morning had brought him once more face to face with this change

in his life. The place across the table had been empty for so many years that he resented the appearance there of this slender dark girl, pouring his coffee with an ease that puzzled and even touched him. There had been another girl like her, in the long ago, and this was her child. The resemblance between mother and daughter was so marked that he grew uneasy as he pondered it; he made a pretense of holding up his newspaper to shut out the girl, and when he dropped it Zelda was waiting for him, her elbows on the table, her hands clasped under her chin.

"Oh, pardon me!" he exclaimed, rising hastily.

As she helped him into his overcoat her hand touched a hammer he carried in his pocket with a miscellaneous assortment of nails, for use in repairing the small properties he owned in many parts of town, and she drew the implement forth and inspected it at arm's length.

"Why, father! What on earth is this?"

The nails jingled, and she made a dive into the pocket and drew forth a handful.

"Why, you've forgotten to empty your pockets! You mustn't go about with this hardware in your clothes."

He reached for the things, a little shamefacedly.

"You don't understand. I need them to make trifling repairs, you know." He smiled, and she put the things back into his pockets, still laughing at him.

"I must go about with you. I can carry the hammer. Maybe you will let me drive a nail once in a while, if I'm good."

He drew out a faded silk handkerchief and began twisting it about his throat, but Zelda took it from him and adjusted it carefully under his coat collar; and she

brushed his old brown derby hat with a whisk broom that lay on the hall table.

He suffered her ministrations with his patient smile, into which he tried to throw something of a look of pride; and when she had set the hat squarely on his head, she drew back and regarded him critically and then kissed him on the cheek.

"Now be sure to come home to luncheon always. You didn't come yesterday and it was lonely. I must get Polly to show me the way to the grocery. I don't intend to let her be the boss. I'm sure she's been abusing you all these years."

"Oh, in time you will come to it. Polly will do very well, and you oughtn't to be bothered with such things. I—I usually buy the groceries myself. One of my tenants is a grocer and—and—he does a little better for me!"

"Oh, to be sure. You must do it in your own way, father." There was a note of disappointment in her voice, and he would have liked to concede something to her, but he did not know how.

He turned to the door and went out, and she watched him hurry down the street.

She roamed idly about the house, going finally to the kitchen, where the colored woman told her that orders for the remaining meals of the day had been given by her father. Polly viewed Zelda with admiration, but she did not ask advice, and Zelda continued her wanderings, going finally to the attic with the key-basket.

The place was pitch dark when she threw open the door, and as there was no way of lighting it, she went down and brought several old glass candlesticks from

the parlor. The attic was a great low room extending over the whole of the house. It was unplastered and the cobwebs of many years hung from the rafters. Boxes and barrels abounded. Bunches of herbs, long dried, and garden tools hung here and there; in a corner an old saddle was suspended by one stirrup. Pieces of furniture covered with cloths were distributed under the eaves, their draperies heavy with dust, and the light of the candles gave them a spectral appearance. Zelda went about peering at the labels that had been tacked carefully to every article. Here, then, was something to do—something that had even a touch of adventure; and she went for water and a broom and sprinkled and swept the floor.

There were several trunks of her mother's clothing and Zelda peered into these bravely. Her mother had arranged them thus shortly before her death. The girl was touched by their nice order; they were folded many times in tissue paper and were sweet with lavender. There stole again into her heart a sense of loneliness, of separation from the past to which these plaintive things belonged; and there lay beneath everything a wonder and awe, as of one who entered with another's key some strange, dark chamber of life. A sob clutched her throat as she ran her fingers caressingly over the parcels at the top of a small brass-bound trunk that contained little trinkets for the toilet-table. Unlike the other boxes she had opened, this had evidently been packed in haste. One flat packet had been crowded into the top, and the lid had crushed it, so that the paper wrapping had fallen aside. It held a small address book, bound in red leather; and Zelda ran the leaves through

her fingers, noting the names of persons who were her mother's friends. "Margaret Dameron" was written on one of the fly leaves. The book had been intended as a register of visits, begun at the threshold of her married life; but, from appearances, it had been abandoned soon as an address book. At the back, where the ink was fresher and of a different kind, some of the pages were filled. The girl carried the book close to the shrouded table where her candles stood and opened it.

*"This is to you, Julia or Rodney. They have told me to-day that I am going to die; but I have known it for a long time. The end is nearer than they think it is; and I am going to set down here an appeal that I can not bring myself to make to either of you directly. It is about Zelda. I think she will be like us. God grant it may be so. I know what I hope her future may be; but I dare not plan it. My own—you know that I planned my own. * * * Save her, as you tried to save me from myself, if it should be necessary. She is very dear and gentle; but she has our pride. I can see it growing day by day. They say that we Merriams are hard and proud; but she will never be hard. Do for her what you would have done for me. Do not let him kill the sweetness and gentleness in her. Keep her away from him if you can; but do not let her know what I have suffered from him. I have arranged for him to care for the property I have to leave her, so that she may never feel that I did not trust him. He will surely guard what belongs to her safely. * * * Perhaps I was unjust to him; it may have been my fault; but if she can respect or love him I wish it to be so."*

Zelda read on. There were only a few pages of this appeal, but the words sank into her consciousness with the weight of lead. She was to be saved from her father, if need be, by her aunt and uncle; but she must not know what this dead woman, her mother, had suffered at his hands. There was the heartache of years in the lines; they had not been written to her, but fate had brought them under her eyes. She closed the book, clasping it in her hands, and stared into the dark area beyond the candlelight. Her mind was busily reconstructing the life of her mother, of whom she knew so little. The book that she held, with its pitiful plea for her own security and happiness, opened a new world to her; her mother's words brought the past before her vividly and sent her thoughts into the future with a fierce haste of transition.

This was her home-coming and this was home! She forgot for the moment that she had friends anywhere; she felt herself a stranger in her native city, in the house where she was born. Her heart went out to her mother, across a distance that was vaster than any gulf of time, for there was added the greater void that sympathy and love would have filled if mother and child might have touched hands to-day.

Her fingers came upon the broken wrapper that had fallen from the little book. She lifted it to the light and read:

"Private. For brother Rodney or sister Julia."

CHAPTER III

ZELDA RECEIVES A VISITOR

The front door-bell rang—it was an old-fashioned contrivance, on a wire, and pealed censoriously—and Zelda thrust the book back into the trunk and ran to the second-floor landing to listen. Polly, the colored maid-of-all-work, admitted Mrs. Forrest warily, though Mrs. Forrest was a woman for whom doors were usually flung wide.

“Good morning, Aunt Julia! Welcome to your ancestral home! Come on up!” Zelda called from the top of the stairs. “Leave the door open, Polly, so Mrs. Forrest can see the way.”

There was something reluctant and difficult about the Dameron front door. It swung open so close to the newel post that ingress was difficult, and when you were once in, the hall was a narrow, dark and inhospitable place.

“What on earth are you doing, Zee?” demanded Mrs. Forrest, gathering up her skirts and beginning the ascent.

“I’m cleaning house a little. The steps are rather steep, but it’s nothing when you get used to it.” Zelda bent over the railing and contemplated her aunt critically.

“I’m not sure that your clothes will do for these up-

per regions." Zelda looked down commandingly. She had twisted a handkerchief round her head; a big gingham apron and a dusting cloth in her hand bore further testimony to her serious intentions.

"I suppose you won't kiss me in these togs, beloved; it *would* be unseemly."

"My dear Zee, this will never do!" And Mrs. Forrest, having reached the second floor, surveyed her niece with disapproval.

"Do you mean the clothes?" asked Zelda, putting her hand to her turban. "I flattered myself that I looked rather well. I'm exploring the garret. I'm not really doing anything but poke about; and it's great fun, raking in the dust of the past—a very remote past, too!"

Mrs. Forrest sniffed contemptuously.

"I'm sure there are stunning antiques up here that beat anything you ever saw. I've only touched the crust. Better come up and look it over. Oh, Polly,"—the old colored woman lingered below—"you needn't wait. It's around this way, auntie, if you're rested enough. Those lodgings we had in Florence last winter were three flights up, and we didn't mind a bit. You see, father gave me a basket of old keys and told me to rummage anywhere I liked. I never expected to find anything so much fun as this. Take your hand off the rail there, and save your gloves;—I'm going to dust it soon. And here we are! Don't the candles give a fine touch? Lamps up here would be sacrilegious. It's been swept, and there's a place over there on that box where you can sit down without spoiling your clothes. If you're very good, I might let you read some of your old love-letters. There's a lot of them—"

"Don't be silly ; of course they're not mine."

"Some of the gentlemen would probably like to have them back—to read to their children," persisted Zelda, who liked to plague her aunt.

"This is a horrible hole, Zee. You must go right down." Mrs. Forrest was staring about frowningly.

"I might read a few extracts to help you remember,—"

A trunk stood within the arc of the candle's flame. It was filled with old papers and letters, and Zelda flung up the lid to pique her aunt's curiosity.

"Don't trouble! You must burn all these old things. Your grandfather never destroyed anything, and your mother kept all he left. Old letters ought never to be kept; they're dangerous. I'm about settled myself. I came in to see how you're getting on, Zee. What kind of a cook have you?"

Zelda hesitated. "Oh, she's very good; very good indeed," she declared with sudden ardor.

"Black?"

"Yes, black. There isn't any other kind here, is there? I don't remember any other kind," Zelda added vaguely, as though making an effort to recall the complexion of domestic service in Mariona.

"The blacks are not inevitable. I have Swedes. You remember, I had our consul at Stockholm get them for me. Your Uncle Rodney has two Japanese who do everything. How many of these blacks does your father keep?"

"Well, there's Aunt Polly," Zelda answered slowly.

"Is she the slattern that let me in?"

"Yes, but don't call names; she's a dear old soul. You mustn't talk that way about her. She's devoted to me."

"I should think she would be."

"Thank you, very kindly." And then, as if recalling the list of servants with difficulty: "There's the cook! Did I mention her?"

"What's she like?"

"A good deal like Polly. Yes, very much like her."

"Can she cook?"

"Oh yes; well enough. Father's tastes are very simple; and you know I never did eat much."

"I don't remember anything of the kind. Most of our family are hard to please."

"I've heard that Uncle Rodney is an epicure. I hope he'll invite me down to dinner very soon."

"It's possible that he may. His home is perfectly managed; he runs it like a club; a club is a man's idea of Heaven, they say: anything, when you ring; no apologies and no questions asked."

"It sounds attractive. Just think of being able to command chocolates by pushing a button!"

"Well, you have a housemaid?"

"Yes; there's a housemaid."

"Black?"

"Yes,—a good deal like Polly," answered Zee, cheerfully.

"What else do you keep?"

"There's the laundress. She's like Polly, too,—the same dusky race. They all look alike to me."

"They use chemicals," observed Mrs. Forrest. "All American laundresses use chemicals. What else?"

"There's a man. He's Polly's grandfather or uncle—something like that. He's a general utility, and only comes on call."

"Better get rid of the whole lot."

"In time, of course. I'm going to see what I can do with this old furniture first."

"You'd better buy what you need new. I never had any patience with this idea of gathering up old rubbish just because it's old. And then there's the microbe theory; it sounds reasonable and there's probably a good deal in it."

"Horrors! The garret's probably full. Perhaps there are some in those love-letters." Zelda laughed; her mirth was seemingly spontaneous, and bubbled up irrelevantly.

"If there's anything of mine up here, for heaven's sake burn it right away. And now clean yourself up and come out with me. You must show yourself or people won't know you're in town. And come home to luncheon with me afterward."

"I'd like to, Aunt Julia, but I really mustn't. Father comes home to luncheon."

"Oh, he does, does he? Well, he has had a good many meals alone and the shock wouldn't kill him."

"He's perfectly splendid! He's just as kind and thoughtful as can be. I didn't know that anybody's father could be so nice."

Mrs. Forrest rose and swept the garret disapprovingly with her lorgnette; and there may have been an excess of disapproval that was meant for something else. Julia Forrest was a woman without sentiment, for there are such in the world. The lumber-room did not interest her, and she was anxious to get out into the sunlight. She was too indolent by nature to have much curiosity: she was not a woman who spent all her rainy days

poring over lavender-scented trifles and weeping over old letters. She was born in this old house, and she had played as a girl in the wooded pasture that once lay east of it. Her father's fields were now forty-foot lots, through which streets had been cut, and the houses that had been built up thickly all about were of a formal urban type. The Merriam homestead was to Julia Forrest merely an old, shabby and uncomfortable house, whose plumbing was doubtless highly unsanitary. She had been married there; her father and mother had died there; but the place meant nothing to her beyond the fact that it was now her niece's home. It occurred to her that she ought to see Zelda's room, to be sure the girl was comfortable; but Zelda did not invite her in when they reached the second floor.

"The letters were beautiful; they wrote lovely letters in those days," Zelda persisted ironically. "I wish I could have some half as nice."

"Do get your things, Zee; it's fine outdoors and the outing will do you good."

"I'm very sorry, but I can't go this morning, *ma tante*. I have a lot to do. I'll be freer after a little."

"You're foolish, very foolish. When shall I see you, then?"

"I'll be along late in the afternoon sometime."

"And then stop to dinner—"

"Very sorry; but father will expect me. It doesn't seem quite kind to forsake him—when he's so nice to me."

"I suppose not; but bring him along. We're all an unsociable lot. They say the Merriams and their connections are queer—I don't like the word. Your uncle and

I want you to raise the fallen reputation of the family. Do be conventional, whatever you do."

"Oh, I shall be that,—commonplace even."

"Don't come down in those clothes!" Mrs. Forrest was descending the stairs.

"All right, Aunt Julia. Good-by!"

When the front door had closed, Zelda sat down on the stairs and laughed softly to herself.

"Oh, Polly," she called.

The black woman shuffled slowly into the hall and looked up gravely at the girl.

"Polly, I wish to see the footman the moment he returns to the house. And the butler's work is very unsatisfactory; I shall have to let him go. And please say to the cook that there will be pie for dinner until further notice,—apple-pie with cheese. And the peasants,—they will be received by My Majesty on the lawn at five as usual, and largess will be distributed. Will you execute these commissions at once, Polly? Stand not on the order of your going—" She laughed down at the amazed colored woman and then ran swiftly up stairs.

She did not pause until she reached the candle-lighted table in the garret and knelt before it, with her face against her mother's little book, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER IV

MR. MERRIAM MAKES SUGGESTIONS

The law offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr were tucked away in the rear of an old building that stood at the apex of a triangle formed by Jefferson Street and Commonwealth Avenue. The firm had been tenants of the same rooms for so many years that any outward sign of their occupancy had ceased to be necessary. There was, to be sure, a battered tin sign at the entrance, but its inscription could be read only by persons who remembered it from bygone days. The woodwork in the series of low rooms occupied by the firm had once been white, but it was now yellow, as though from years of intimacy with dusty file-boxes and law sheep. The library, the quaintest and quietest place in town, was marked by a pleasing twilight of antiquity. Across the hall the private rooms of the several partners were distinguished by their domestic atmosphere, to which the locust-trees that brushed the windows and the grained wooden mantels contributed.

Knight and Kittredge had been prominent in state politics during and immediately following the Civil War. They were dead now, but Carr, who had left politics to his partners, survived, and he had changed nothing in the offices. The private rooms of the dead members of the

firm were still as they had been, though Morris Leighton, the chief clerk, and the students who always overran the place now made use of them. Knight, Kittredge and Carr had been considered invincible in the old days; and Carr was still the best lawyer in the state, and the one whose name was most frequently subscribed to the appearance docket of the Federal Court. There were other lawyers who said that he was not what he had been; but they were not the sort whose opinion creates public sentiment or affects the ruling of courts. For though Michael Carr was a mild little man, with a soft voice and brown eyes that might have been the pride of any girl, he was a formidable antagonist. The students in the office affectionately referred to him among themselves as "A. D.," which, being interpreted, meant Annotated Digest—a delicate reference to the fact that Michael Carr was able to cite cases from memory, by title and page, in nearly every series of decisions that was worth anything.

In the old days it had been the custom of the members of the firm of Knight, Kittredge and Carr to assemble every morning at eight o'clock in the library for a brief discussion of the news of the day, or for a review of the work that lay before them. The young men who were fortunate enough to be tolerated in the offices had always enjoyed these discussions immensely, for Governor Kittredge and Senator Knight had known men and manners as well as the law; and Michael Carr knew Plato and the Greek and Latin poets as he knew the way home.

These morning conferences were still continued in Morris Leighton's day, though Knight and Kittredge had long been gone. It might be a topic from the day's news

that received attention, or some new book—Michael Carr was a persistent novel reader—or it might be even a bit of social gossip that was discussed. Mr. Carr was a man of deliberate habits, and when he set apart this half-hour for a talk with his young men, as he called them, it made no difference that the president of a great railway cooled his heels in the outer office while the Latin poets were discussed in the library, or that other dignified Caucasians waited while negro suffrage was debated. Mr. Carr did not like being crowded. He knew how to crowd other people when there was need; but it pleased him sometimes to make other people wait.

Ezra Dameron was waiting for him this morning, for it was the first of October; and on the first of every month Ezra Dameron went to the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr to discuss his personal affairs. He was of an economical turn, and he made it a point to combine as many questions as possible in a single consultation. His relations with the offices were of long standing and dated back to a day when Knight, Kittredge and Carr were a new firm and Ezra Dameron was a young merchant whom people respected, and whose prospects in life were bright. There had been a time when he was pointed to as a handsome man; but that was very long ago, and he was not an attractive object now, as he moved restlessly about Michael Carr's private room. He carried a packet of papers in one hand and he walked now and then to a window, whose panes were small and old-fashioned, and looked out upon the locust-trees in the little court. He was clean-shaven, as always. His beak-like nose had given him in his youth an air of imperiousness that was now lacking; it combined with his

thin lips and restless gray eyes to give an impression of cruelty. From one pocket of his overcoat the handle of the hammer protruded; and the other bulged with the accompanying nails. There were people who held that his inoffensive carpentry was an affectation, and that he practised it merely to enhance his reputation for penuriousness, a reputation which, the same people said, he greatly enjoyed.

While Ezra Dameron waited for Michael Carr, Rodney Merriam was walking slowly from his house in Seminary Square down High Street to Jefferson, swinging his stick, and gravely returning the salutations of friends and acquaintances. In Mariona, where men of leisure are suspicious characters, it was easy to take Rodney Merriam's peculiarities far too seriously. When he was at home he lived quietly, as became a gentleman, and those who tried to find something theatrical in his course of life were doomed to disappointment. He was, perhaps, amused to know that his fellow townsmen puzzled over him a good deal and convinced themselves that he was a strange and difficult man,—but that, after all, he was a Merriam, and what could one expect! He usually knew what he was about, however, and when he started for a place he reached it without trouble. Thus he came presently to the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr. He stepped into the reception-room and found it empty. The door into the library was closed but he could hear Carr's voice; and he knew that the lawyer was holding one of those morning talks with his clerks and students that Morris Leighton had often described. He looked about with interest and then crossed the hall. The doors of the three private offices were closed, but he

turned the knob of the one marked in small black letters "Mr. Carr," and went in.

Ezra Dameron was still looking out of the window when the door was flung open. He supposed Carr had come, and having been gazing out into the sunny court, his sight did not accommodate itself at once to the dim light of the little room.

"Ah, Mr. Carr—" he began.

"Good morning, Ezra," said Rodney Merriam, blandly. Dameron knew the voice before he recognized his brother-in-law, and after a second's hesitation he advanced with a great air of cordiality.

"Why, Rodney, what brings you into the haunts of the law? I thought you were a man who never got into trouble. I'm waiting for Mr. Carr. I have a standing appointment with him this same day every month—excepting Sundays, of course."

"So I have understood. I don't want to see Mr. Carr, however; I want to see you."

Dameron glanced at his brother-in-law anxiously. He had believed Merriam's appearance to be purely accidental, and he was not agreeably disappointed to find that he had been mistaken. He looked at the little clock on Carr's desk, and was relieved to find that the lawyer would undoubtedly appear in a few minutes.

"I should be glad, at any other time, Rodney, but Mr. Carr is very particular about his appointments."

"I have heard so, Ezra. What I have to say to you will not interfere with your engagement with Mr. Carr."

Merriam stood with his back to the little grate-fire, holding his hat and stick in his hand.

"As near as I can remember, Ezra, it has been ten years since I enjoyed a conversation with you."

"Better let the old times go,—I—I—am willing to let them go, Rodney."

"And on that last occasion, if my memory serves me, I believe I told you that you were an infernal scoundrel."

"You were very violent, very unjust; but let it all go, Rodney. I treasure no unkind feelings."

"I think, to be more exact, that I called you a damned cur," Merriam went on, "and it would be a source of real annoyance to me to have you think for a moment that I have changed my mind. I want to have a word with you about Zelda. She has chosen to go to live with you—"

"Very loyal, very noble of her. I'm sure I appreciate it."

"I hope you do. She doesn't understand what a contemptible hound you are, and I don't intend to tell her. And you may be quite sure that her Aunt Julia will never tell her how you treated her mother,—how you made her life a curse to her. I don't want you to think that because I have let you alone these ten years I have forgotten or forgiven you. I wouldn't trust you to do anything that demanded the lowest sense of honor or manhood."

There was no sign of anger or even resentment in Ezra's face. His inevitable smile died away in a sickly grin, but he said nothing.

"With this little preface I think you will understand that what I have sought you out for is not to ask favors but to give orders, in view of Zee's return."

"But Rodney, Rodney,—that matter needs no discussion. I shall hope to make my daughter happy in her father's house—I am her natural protector—"

"You are, indeed; but a few instructions from me will be of great assistance, Ezra."

Dameron sat down, changing his position restlessly several times, so that the loose nails in his pockets jingled.

"To begin with," Merriam continued, "I want you to understand that the first time I hear you have mistreated that girl or in any way made her uncomfortable I shall horsewhip you in front of the post-office. The second time I shall cowhide you in your own house, and the third offense I shall punish either by shooting you or taking you out and dropping you into the river, I haven't fully decided which. I expect you to provide generously for her out of the money her mother left her. If you haven't squandered it there ought to be a goodly sum by this time."

"I fear she has acquired expensive tastes abroad. Julia always spent money wastefully."

Dameron smiled and shook his head deprecatingly, with his air of martyrdom. When Merriam shifted from one foot to the other, Dameron started uneasily.

"You ugly hypocrite, talking about expensive tastes! I suppose you have let everybody you know imagine that it has been your money that has kept Zee abroad. It's like you, and you're certainly a consistent beast. As I was saying, I mean that you shall treat her well, not according to your own ideas, but mine. I want you to brace up and try to act or look like a white man. You've got to keep enough servants in that old shell of yours to

take care of it. You must be immensely rich by this time. You haven't spent any money for twenty years; and you've undoubtedly profited well in your handling of what Margaret left Zee. That was like Margaret, to make you trustee of her child's property, after the dog's life you had led her! You may be sure that it wasn't because she had any confidence in you, but because she had borne with you bravely, and it was like her to make an outward show of respect for you from the grave. And I suppose she hoped you might be a man at last for the girl's sake. The girl's her mother over again; she's a thoroughbred. And you—I suppose God tolerates you on earth merely to make Heaven more attractive."

Merriam at no time raised his voice; the Merriams were a low-spoken family; and when Rodney Merriam was quietest he was most dangerous.

Voices could be heard now across the hall. The morning conference was at an end; and Michael Carr crossed to his room at twenty-five minutes before nine, and opened the door in the full knowledge that Ezra Dameron was waiting for him. Many strange things had happened in the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr; but Michael Carr had long ago formed the habit of seeing everything and saying nothing.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said affably, and shook hands with both men.

"I have just been warning Ezra against overwork," said Merriam, composedly, and without changing his position. "At Ezra's age a man ought to check himself; he ought to let other people use the hammer and drive the nails."

"Rodney always had his little joke," said Dameron,

and laughed a dry laugh that showed his teeth in his very unpleasant smile.

"Don't be in a hurry, Rod," said Carr.

"Oh, I'm just roaming about, Mike. I find that a morning walk helps my spirits."

And Merriam wished both gentlemen a satisfactory disposition of their business. It was, of course, a perfectly natural thing for him to drop into a law office on a pleasant October morning and, meeting there a connection of his family, hold converse with him on matters of common interest. Michael Carr was not, however, a dull man, and he understood perfectly that Rodney Merriam had decided to resume diplomatic relations with Ezra Dameron; and he rightly guessed the reason to be the return of Margaret Dameron's daughter to her father's house.

Merriam found Morris Leighton at work in the library. The young man threw down his book in surprise as the old gentleman darkened the door.

"The date shall be printed in red ink on the office wall! I never expected to see you here!"

"It may never happen again, my boy. I rarely cross Jefferson Street, except on my way to the station. Is this all you have to do, read books? I sometimes wish I had been a lawyer. Nothing to do but read and write; it's the easiest business there is. I really think it's easier than preaching, and it's safer. My father set me apart for the ministry. He was a good man, but a poor guesser."

"Mr. Carr would like to see you; I'd be glad to call him,—except that this is his morning with Mr. Dameron."

"To be sure it is; but don't trouble yourself. I've seen both of them, anyhow."

"Oh!"

"I just happened in and found Mr. Dameron waiting; so I amused him until Mr. Carr appeared. You still have your historic morning round-up here, I suppose. There are two things that you young gentlemen will undoubtedly derive from Mr. Carr,—good manners and sound literary tastes."

"That's so; but how about the law?"

"The law isn't important. My friend Stanley down here knows the law, they say; but if that's so, it's clearly a business for stupid men. He's built up a reputation by solemnly twirling his glasses and looking wise at the judges. Bah! And yet he fools a great many people; there are some who think he knows more than Carr, simply because he always wears a frock coat. You know he got his walk from Judge Paget. Paget was wounded in the war and had a little limp. Stanley has always tried to imitate him as far as a man without brains can imitate a man with good ones. Stanley's clumsy shuffle is Judge Paget's limp as near as Stanley can do it. My dear boy, look solemn, get eye-glasses as soon as possible and twirl them on a black ribbon, having at the same time a far-away look in your eyes. It's effective; there's millions in it!"

"That sounds easy. But Mr. Carr has started me on another line. He insists that it's all work; and he seems to practise what he preaches."

Merriam glanced at the somber shelves and shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe Carr's right. I think he's right in most

things. How soon is he going to take you into partnership?"

"Never, probably. As head clerk he can make me do work that I might want to dodge if I were a partner."

"Well, he will treat you right. Don't get restless. The law is changing fast. It has ceased to be a profession nowadays; it's a business. But somebody's got to write the briefs that win the cases, just as Carr does, and you'd better get in the line of succession."

Leighton leaned far back in the cane-bottomed chair—there was never a decent chair in the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr—and clasped his hands about his head. A sudden look of liking leaped into Rodney Merriam's eyes. That lounging pose, the long nervous hands clasped behind the head; the steady gray eyes, the straight nose, firm jaw and humorous kind mouth—all suggested to Merriam other years when there was another Morris Leighton, who wore a blue uniform and drilled his battery to a degree of efficiency that made him a marked man in the Army of the Tennessee.

"I don't think you will ever want to dodge work or anything else, Morris. That is, if you're as much like your father inside as out, you won't be a dodger. Your father was a gentleman, and the tribe is getting scarce."

Merriam continued talking for an hour, apparently without motive; but he was listening, nevertheless, for signs of life from Michael Carr's private office.

Mr. Carr was heard presently in the outer hall, and Merriam rose, as though he suddenly remembered an appointment.

"Don't forget the lobster, Sunday night, as usual," he said; "and don't forget what I told you about looking up

Mrs. Forrest. She's been around a bit and knows a few things. Well, gentlemen,"—to Carr and Dameron who were exchanging the last words of their interview in the hall—"I hope you've parted on good terms. Going, Ezra? Then I'll walk down the street with you a little way."

He took Dameron's arm and the two men descended to Jefferson Street, which was crowded with shoppers at this hour. Merriam thrust his hand under his brother-in-law's arm and they walked along with an appearance of intimacy, just as Merriam had planned they should. People turned to look at them, the erect, handsome old man with his shining silk hat, and his bent companion in the faded brown overcoat and dingy derby.

Merriam was exchanging reminiscences of old Seminary days with Dameron. There was, in the long retrospect, extra-territorial ground where these two men could meet without friction. Ezra Dameron knew well enough that his brother-in-law had deliberately planned this meeting and in his heart he resented being carried down Jefferson Street merely that the public might be advised of the fact that two of its citizens were once more on friendly terms after a long period of enmity. But he was a martyr; he had always been a martyr to the insolence of the arrogant Merriam family, and he found a certain hypocritical satisfaction in being abused.

The two men paused at the corner of Wabash Street, where an old hotel was making way for a new structure, and they watched the workmen for a few minutes, commenting on the changes that had latterly removed many landmarks.

"Well, Ezra, no doubt you're a busy man, as you always used to be, and anxious to get back to work."

"I have a few repairs to make on some of my little properties." The purr in Ezra Dameron's voice was irritating, but Merriam had succeeded in his undertaking of the morning and wished to end the interview amicably. He had outlined a program for Ezra Dameron's guidance and advertised a reconciliation. Ezra Dameron bored him immensely, and he now wished to be rid of him.

"Don't forget those little points that I suggested, Ezra. It may encourage you to know that I have my eye on you. Good morning."

Dameron struck off at a rapid pace toward the southern end of town, and Merriam retraced his steps in Jefferson Street to High.

"I'm a stranger in my own town," Merriam reflected.

He mailed a letter at the post-office and walked slowly homeward. The federal building with its fort-like walls was doomed. Already its successor was building farther up-town. Perhaps it was just as well so, for the men who were identified in Rodney Merriam's mind with the old post-office had gone or were going fast. For years after the great war, the federal office-holders had been veteran soldiers. Even the federal judge,—the judge with the brown eyes and the limp that was due to a rebel bullet,—the judge who narrowly missed being president of the United States,—had been one of Grant's generals. The marshal of the district, a noble military figure to the end of his days, had been a major-general of distinction; and the pension agent, a sturdy German with a tremendous power of invective, who had learned his English by reading Shakespeare, was remembered as one of "Pap"

Thomas's best brigadiers. And there was the district attorney of the old days,—a gentle and winning spirit, who was something of a poet, too. He had been a major at twenty, with a record for gallantry that would read like a chapter of romance, if it could be put on paper. Even the court crier was no longer a crippled veteran, hobbling to his seat on crutches; and there was now an ex-confederate captain in the marshal's office! The only outpost held by any of the old military coterie was the post-office itself, where a sturdy veteran of both the Mexican and Civil wars still held his own.

But of Rodney Merriam's intimates none remained. All were gone, those familiar militant spirits, and Rodney Merriam mourned them as a man who has never known a woman's love or the touch of children's hands mourns the men that have meant most to him in his life. He could no longer sit in the deep leather chairs in the grim old building when the afternoon light grew dim in the deep embrasured windows, and gossip of bygone days, for the old rooms were occupied now by men whom Merriam did not know; and so far as he was concerned his friends had no successors.

He went home, and after he had made himself comfortable, he stood for a while looking out upon the new flat across the street, which had lately cut off his view, swearing at it in a very pleasant tone of voice.

CHAPTER V

A POLITE REQUEST FOR MONEY

"About your allowance, Zee, I haven't fixed it yet. So many matters have been pressing me. But of course if you need anything—"

"Yes, father, I'm glad you spoke of it. I really should like a little money."

He looked at her in his quick, furtive way. He was disappointed; he had expected her to disavow any needs.

"I didn't suppose," he said, dropping his eyes to his plate, and cutting a bit of bacon deliberately—"I didn't suppose you would require any money for yourself as yet. 'There are so many trunks of your clothes up stairs'—he smiled indulgently—"you can hardly need anything at present."

"Clothes? No, I don't believe I do need any clothes at present. It wasn't clothes that I had in mind."

"Oh!"

"I don't need anything to wear just now. But I should like some money of my own to spend. A thousand dollars will run me for a little while."

He glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes while he continued to manipulate his knife and fork. He really thought she might be jesting; but she was stirring her coffee absent-mindedly, and did not look at him.

"May I trouble you for a little more coffee, Zelda?"

He watched her pour it and add the sugar and cream. They were testing each other in the light of a new attitude that had been established between them, unconsciously on his part, but with studied care on hers. She had felt, for a few days following her morning in the garret, that her position in her father's house was intolerable; that she could not go on with it. But this had yielded before a new feeling of pride and courage that had risen in her. The message her mother had left—a real testament it was, thrown back from the very shadow of death—wakened in her a sense of duty and obligation that was fantastic. She would not, she said to herself, be less brave than her mother; so she had made her resolve; she would not forsake her father for her mother's sister and brother; she would be true to the example of her mother, who had suffered much and kept her sorrow to herself.

At twenty we do not look very far ahead; and Zelda Dameron thought it easy to act a part. Her mother's life had been ruined; her father had the power to make her own life equally a drag and burden; but she would not have it so. She would play her youth against his age, and triumph; and this first encounter between them touching money gave her an opportunity. It was his vulnerable point and she saw that she had reached it. She had heard from her aunt that the estate her father held for her was worth about four hundred thousand dollars; and the income from this was sufficient, she knew, to give her much more than the comforts of life. So she had asked for a thousand dollars as an experiment; and she debated the matter with her father in an

amiable spirit of recklessness well calculated to annoy him.

"We were speaking of your allowance," he began again. "You named a large sum—a very large sum. May I ask what you want with so much? I'd rather pay a certain amount to your credit at the bank every month; but so large an amount—it would be ample for a year, I should say."

"No," Zelda began slowly. "I don't think it would be enough for a year, father. You see, in the first place I must have a decent horse."

"Eh, what? A horse? Why, we have a very good horse and carriage. The horse is very good. I bought it only a few weeks ago to be ready for your return."

"Yes, that was nice of you; but I don't care much for a carriage. I like a runabout that I can drive myself; and a horse—what do you call it, a combination horse—that will do for me to ride, too. I know the ancient in the barn. It isn't quite up to the mark. I want a horse to ride and drive; and you know a plow horse won't do for that."

"But you'd need an attendant," he went on forbearingly. "A girl can't ride alone in the city. It wouldn't be becoming. You'd better give up the idea. There are many other forms of amusement and exercise."

"Oh, I think I can manage that. Very likely Uncle Rodney will ride with me sometimes. And I'm quite grown up, you know."

"Your Uncle Rodney, my dear," he began, and shook his head and smiled in a grieved, sorrowful way. "He's hardly a good adviser in these things. Rodney is an excellent man, but he's never had any responsibilities

in life. He's always done exactly what he pleased without consulting any one. You mustn't let him persuade you into extravagances. He and your aunt are a good deal alike in their wasteful ways."

"I suppose they do get what they want. They're awfully nice, though. They're perfect dears. And I must say, father, that they've never said a thing to me about horses. That's my own wilfulness and extravagance."

He laughed and smiled at her with his mirthless smile.

"There's a lot of trickery in the horse business. You'd better let me get the horse for you, if you really want one."

"Oh, never! Half the fun would be to buy my own."

"But these horse dealers!"—he shrugged his shoulders. "A girl must not deal with them."

"Oh, I didn't mean to buy my horse here. I'll go to Kentucky where the good horses come from and buy my charger there. You see, Mrs. Carr has friends in Lexington. She was telling me wonderful things of the country down there. It would be great fun to go. Why, maybe you'd go with me!"

"No! no!"

Ezra Dameron sank back in his chair. He was baffled and perplexed. This demand for money had come unexpectedly. He had underestimated the girl's intelligence, for he had never hinted to her that the property he held in trust was large. On the other hand he had several times implied quite pointedly that it was necessary for them to exercise the greatest economy. He challenged for the first time her apparent simplicity and frankness. She was deeper perhaps than he had imagined; it was wholly possible that she was asking for

this sum of money merely to draw him out. It might be that she wished a refusal in order to demand an accounting of her property. He feared Rodney Merriam, and he thought it quite possible that his brother-in-law had suggested this course of procedure; for he believed Merriam to be a subtle and crafty man. Zelda was very probably acting under her uncle's instructions; but he would not be caught by any net spread by Rodney Merriam. The amount was large, to be sure, but it was no breaking matter; he would give it to the girl graciously. He suffered her to talk of other matters as he pondered, and he said, after he had risen to go:

"I shall stop at the bank and open an account for you this morning. I believe you said a thousand dollars. Of course you weren't serious. But I'm disposed to be generous. I will call it five hundred dollars."

He inclined his body slightly. There was in him a formal courtesy, or the mockery of courtesy. He could give a fine touch to an ignoble thing, if need be; or he could yield to an importunity in a way that brought him becoming martyrdom.

Zelda went with him to the door, as she had begun to do on the first morning after her return, and rendered him those little offices that women have ordained as part of the minor ritual of their service of love.

She watched him as he walked rapidly away from the house without looking back. She was already half-ashamed of herself for having demanded money of him; yet there was a cry in her blood for war, for contest, that this little triumph of the breakfast-table did not satisfy; but as she watched him disappear at the corner pity again possessed her heart.

An occupant of one of the new houses over the way came out to go to his appointed labors of the day. His wife and two little children followed him, and the family gathered about a flower bed in the plot of ground by their doorstep and discussed the frost that had blighted their plants. The comments of the children rang out in droll trebles ; and they delayed their father with many clutches and embraces as he started away. Zelda watched them with a new pain in her heart. The shouts of the children to their father touched a need of her own, and she turned away into the house with a sob in her throat and tears gathering in her eyes.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOBSTER

"It's burning, I think," suggested Zelda.

"You ought to keep stirring," said Mrs. Forrest.

"It's usually served hot," remarked Leighton. "That's what the books say."

The successful chafing-dish cook must be a good actor also. If the wicks work badly, he must smile at his audience while his fingers burn; or he must be able to tell an amusing story while the alcohol, which is always spreading in places where it should not be, ignites grandly until the table resembles a prairie fire. When the finished rabbit pulls away from the spoon like taffy, and hardens in long strings in the air, only an operator possessing unusual dramatic powers can turn the tragedy into comedy.

"Your advice is neither asked nor desired," Rodney Merriam said, in scorn of his critics. "I've been under fire before."

"You seem to be over it just now," remarked Zelda, who sat nearest him with her elbows on the table.

"They have smokeless powder now; maybe they'll have fireless chafing dishes next," said Morris.

A spot of alcohol in the far corner of the tray had suddenly risen in a thin flame, giving point to Leighton's remark.

"Young people are terribly nervous these days," remarked Merriam, stifling the blaze imperturbably.

"Myself when young—" hummed Zelda. "We're never really old until we begin to lament the past. But you're doing it charmingly, uncle, with quite a touch,—*avec empressement*." She raised her arm and drew an imaginary straight line in the air with the points of her fingers.

"It's a way I have. I'm glad you appreciate it,"—and Merriam nodded to the Japanese boy to put the plates within reach. The lobster diffused a cheering aroma through the air as the old gentleman served it.

"It's delicious. It's a credit to Mr. *à la Newberg*," said Zelda, as she tasted it.

"It's very indigestible, isn't it, Rodney?" asked Mrs. Forrest, guardedly.

"It is, Julia. The best authorities place it next to ten-penny nails for indigestibility. But it's good; and it's better to die than to live lobsterless. Morris, that bottle of ale is yours."

Rodney Merriam had an eye for effects and he thought his guests fitted very well into his dining-room. The furniture was all massive; the walls were decorated in bright red; and the silver on the sideboard and the crystal in the quaint old cabinet in the corner added to the charm of the room. There was no jarring note; the whole house was irreproachably clean; but a man's house always has rigid lines. It is ordained of Heaven that women shall possess certain things, and the home touch is a feminine gift, that no man has ever been able to impart, charm he never so wisely and spend he never so lavishly.

A New York friend who once spent a week with Rodney Merriam in Seminary Square said on leaving that the house was as good as a club; that the only thing he had missed was the signing of checks for what he ordered. Men regard a club as paradise brought to earth, not because they escape there from things feminine or can command a cool siphon by ringing a bell; but because they like full swing at a club kitchen. It is a heart-breaking thing in any man's life when he knows to a moral certainty that the roast on Monday, week after week, will be beef; that on Tuesday it will be fowl, while Wednesday will bring mutton with capers, and so on, to the regular Saturday evening corned beef. It is not that he dislikes any one of these things; it's their inevitableness that causes his brow to darken and all the griefs of a busy day to becloud his table talk. For the stomachs of men are children and like to be surprised.

Rodney Merriam enjoyed his little party. It was going well, without effort on his part. He led his guests from the dining-room to the library, where a fire of hickory wood had just been lighted.

"There's a parlor in this house, but the less you say about it the better," said Merriam. "I found it here when I bought the house and I have never had the nerve to change it."

"This is better,—much more intimate and homelike. I like it, Uncle Rodney. You may graciously invite me again," said Zelda.

"I know a trick worth two of being invited. I just come. I suggest my method as having advantages;" and Leighton smiled at her.

"Yes. One is helpless against intruders," declared

Merriam; "privacy is a lost art. But I must except present company. All I have—anything you see—is yours to command, Zee. Better throw away that cigarette and have a cigar, Morris."

"He's in a generous mood to-night," said Leighton to Zelda. "It's well to seize and appropriate his worldly goods when he offers them. He's offered you the house and given me a cigar."

"I'm nothing if not polite," declared Merriam. "But I don't see what you're complaining of, Morris. You haven't lost your latch-key, have you?"

"No. But I wish to be sure that Miss Dameron understands how difficult you are."

"Does that mean that you have to work hard to pay for the latch-key? Of course the compensations are sufficient," observed Zelda.

"I'm not ashamed of the pains I took to get it. On the whole I think the labor flatters my good taste."

"Oh, that!"

She was looking at Morris steadily and nodded her head gravely. The emphasis on the pronoun was very slight, but it was enough to carry a hint of impertinence.

Merriam and his sister were observing the young people from different points of view. The former was anxious for Leighton to impress Mrs. Forrest and Zelda favorably. Mrs. Forrest, on the other hand, watched the girl with an admiration that was not wholly void of anxiety. People usually laughed at what Zelda said, but Mrs. Forrest was not altogether sure in her own mind as to the quality of the girl's humor; or perhaps she thought the amusement that Zelda created was merely another instance of the ease with which a pretty girl can

carry off a situation. She wondered whether her brother had brought Zelda and Morris Leighton together with a purpose; but she saw no reason for suspecting him. It was natural that her brother should have taken up the son of an old friend; she knew that he was kind and generous; and Morris was a very presentable young man. He crossed the room now, and began talking more particularly to her, though still including the others. He was very straightforward and cordial. He spoke of Marion's social matters with an irony that had no unkindness in it; and when he appealed to her brother for corroboration there was a genuine respect under his joking.

"I'm not a social animal," Merriam remarked. "I've stopped going out. If you could go to a friend's house and hear talk that had sense or wit in it, I'd be glad to leave my slippers and go about. But every house nowadays is a museum of devices for making a row. You no sooner get your hat off than your host turns on a hideous, automatic, perfectly tireless device that squeals and roars like a circus calliope. The devil's in the things and they never run down. The other evening I went to Carr's, thinking I'd have a quiet evening, and he—Mike Carr—had the effrontery to turn loose an infernal machine that squealed out Hamlet's soliloquy and vilely murdered it, so that I wouldn't hear it again—not if Edwin Booth came back to life and offered to give it in this very room! But,—we can have better entertainment here. There's the parlor and a piano. Let there be music."

"Your piano is probably impossible," suggested Mrs. Forrest.

"It's not my fault if it isn't in tune. I had a man at work on it all day yesterday."

"I suppose there are books of music. We usually require something of the kind," said Zelda.

"Um—you ought to have brought your own."

"Not, I hope, without being urged in advance!"

"There are some things here, I think," said Morris, "if you will let me show you the way. Mr. Merriam's music probably dates back to the *Kathleen Mavourneen* period."

"It was a good period, children; don't speak slightly of it."

The old gentleman was lighting a fresh cigar at the mantel. Leighton and Zelda crossed the hall together.

"Shall we stay here?" Merriam asked his sister. "The chairs over there are pretty bad."

The piano itself was not visible, but when the girl sat down by it her profile was turned toward them.

Leighton opened a cabinet of old music, and drew out the sheets for Zelda while they discussed the songs, which were all of a sentimental sort that had long been out of favor.

"I really don't see how they could have done it," said Zelda. "I suppose young women in those days were more courageous, or sentimental, or something. Perhaps we have changed for the worse."

"I shouldn't like to admit it."

"I have heard that lawyers never admit anything," she said, musingly, scanning the songs as Morris held them up for her.

"You're conceding a good deal when you intimate that

I'm a lawyer. But you're hard to please—about the music, I mean!"

"Never mind," she said. "I've thought of something;" and she struck suddenly the prelude of a song.

It was a swift rushing melody in which a gay mood had been imprisoned with an exquisite art, and the girl's voice caught it up and sang it into life. She gave the little Provençal song in the patois; but the words did not matter. It was a song of spring, which the melody told without their aid.

Leighton was standing by her and the sudden out-leaping of the song laid a spell upon him. There was something delightfully joyous and spontaneous in it—as though it were a newly created thing that would always remain in the world, now that a voice had been found for it. He knew nothing of music and the finish of the girl's singing was wasted on him; but the spirit with which she gave the chansonnette amazed him. He had felt that there was a kind of languor in her, an impression created by her way of speaking; but her singing voice dispelled the illusion. There was in her prayer to the spirit of spring a strange new note of passion that struck into his heart and thrilled it.

The song ended as abruptly as it began. The house was very still, save that the voices of Mrs. Forrest and her brother were heard across the hall. Leighton waited; it was not for him to profane the silence into which such melody had gone.

Rodney Merriam looked at his sister inquiringly.

"You never told me—"

"That it was like that? It is wonderful. I never dared try to tell you. I never understood it myself.

Technically it is not so good, her teachers say; but the girl's self gets into it and carries her away. I sometimes wonder whether it is quite right to encourage her. A girl's soul ought to be shielded—"

Mrs. Forrest paused in her helpless way.

"Her soul will take care of itself, I think," said Rodney Merriam.

Zelda turned abruptly to Morris.

"Just once more, if you can stand it. Don't say a word! But I rarely sing anything unless I try a certain piece for my own satisfaction. It's for bigger voices than mine. *Dreams*—you know—a study for *Tristan and Isolde*. I really hope you won't like it at all, for I want it all to myself, no matter how badly I do it. Go on talking," she called to the others across the hall; "this isn't a stunt,—it's just my own little meditation."

She bent her head with an air of preoccupation for a moment, her face wholly serious, before she began:

"Say, oh say, what wondrous dreamings—"

She did not turn at once when the song was done, but sat for a moment very still. She rose smiling.

"Well, there has been music—of a kind, *mon oncle*. Don't you fiddle or do something, Mr. Leighton? I oughtn't to be made the only victim. No! Nothing more from me! That is always my *finale*."

Rodney Merriam had come into the room and he took her cheeks between his hands and kissed her on the forehead.

"I wish I could say it, dear. It's too much—too much—to think of, and a little kid like you!"

The tears glistened in his eyes, but he smiled happily; it did not often happen in Rodney Merriam's life that a smile caught tears on his dark face.

"Dear Uncle Rodney," she said, and rested her hands on his shoulders.

"Let's get out of this," said the old gentleman. "The place is sacred to your singing hereafter." He led the way into the library and poked the fire until it crackled and leaped into the chimney in the way that he liked it.

"We must go home," Mrs. Forrest announced presently.

"Nonsense," growled her brother, who had reached the tranquillity of his fireside pipe and hated to be disturbed.

"Yes; I promised father to be home at ten, and he will stay up for me," Zelda answered brightly, and rose to go. She went up stairs for her wraps and was down at once. Leighton, who had gone to call Mrs. Forrest's carriage, met her in the hall. Merriam had waited for his sister at the foot of the stairs and stood talking to her there.

Zelda was drawing on her gloves. Morris had never consciously watched this process before, and he followed her movements with the wonder that is always awakened in a young man by this sort of feminine legerdemain.

"I didn't say anything about your singing—" began Morris.

"I noticed it!"

"But that was because I couldn't. It was beautiful beyond any words of mine to tell you."

He was speaking earnestly; he was a very earnest fellow, and his gray eyes were honest and friendly. It was

always easy to laugh off the compliments of people who did not mean them; but he clearly was not of that kind.

"I'm glad you liked it," she said simply. "What's the name of that animal?" She indicated a great head that hung on the wall above them.

"That's a moose-head. Your uncle has a fondness for the moose, and goes after one occasionally."

"And gets it? I'm sure Uncle Rodney always gets what he goes for. That's my opinion of him."

"Your faith isn't misplaced. Whether it's a moose or billiards, or a bout at fencing, he's always sure to score."

"Where do you keep *your* moose, Mr. Leighton?"

She asked the question with a disconcerting directness, and he answered soberly.

"I haven't any place to put my moose, so I haven't caught him yet."

"Oh—that!"

"And they're expensive,—time—money."

"I suppose so. Still, I think I should get a moose. Oh, Aunt Julia, we really must—"

"Yes; I'm ready."

"Father was very sorry he couldn't come," said Zelda, to her uncle. "But he always goes to church Sunday evening. He asked me to explain."

"It's too bad he couldn't come. I didn't think of church. I thought Sunday night church wasn't done any more."

"Father's a creature of habit, I find. He always goes, —and to prayer meeting, and to all those things."

"Ah, very likely. I suppose he doesn't insist on the prayer meetings for you."

"No, but I've volunteered! I'm to begin next Thursday night. I'm sure I shall enjoy them."

Merriam looked at her gravely. When she spoke in this way, softly, with her lingering, caressing note at the end of sentences, he did not know what to make of her. He was half disposed to believe she was chaffing him; for she was too clever to be deceived by her father,—for very long, at least. Rodney Merriam was expecting daily that she would throw him over and cease trying to make the best of him and his ugly, forbidding home. His wrath rose every time he reviewed the situation and Zelda's reply just now had sent a wave of hot blood to his face. But she was a Merriam, he remembered. She put her arms about his neck and kissed him good night.

Morris went with them to the carriage. Mrs. Forrest had brought Zelda and was taking her home. Merriam waited for Morris in the library.

"Sit down, lad," said the old gentleman; "don't begin running away."

"Very good. I want to leave you comfortable; but I must be going—"

"Going? No! I refuse to be left here alone yet."

The Japanese boy brought whisky and water, and the old man scolded Morris for taking Scotch, which he pronounced a barbarous liquor, unfit for Americans.

"Well?" he said finally, slowly sipping his own whisky.

"It was a great evening," said Morris.

"Um. How did you get on with my sister?"

"All right, I hope. She asked me to call. I liked her particularly."

"That's good. But for heaven's sake don't call on Sunday afternoons, when she sleeps; and don't ask her how she likes things. She likes most things, but it bores her to be asked. She has a lot of sense,—do you understand? And if she takes a fancy to you, she'll do a lot for you."

Leighton laughed. "Don't embarrass me that way. I can't work two people at once in the same family,—and I'm working you."

"Oh, you are, are you? Bah! That whisky has a green streak in it somewhere."

He set down his glass and put the tips of his fingers together, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair. Then with sudden energy he roared:

"I don't see why you don't like her."

"Mrs. Forrest? Of course I like her. I just said so."

"I heard you. I'm not talking about Mrs. Forrest. Why weren't you decent to my niece? I brought her here so that you could get acquainted with her. I was fool enough to think you had some sense—some social instinct, some idea of good manners, but you acted like a perfect damned clam."

"I am very sorry," said Morris, sitting forward in his chair. "I don't know what you expected. I did my poor level best."

"And it was damned poor, sir, I'd have you know."

Morris was trying hard not to laugh. The old gentleman glared at him fiercely. There was a moment's silence, and then Leighton said, very quietly:

"She is charming,—more than that. There is something very unusual about her. I knew that before she sang; and her singing sets her apart from all the world."

Merriam's face changed slowly. He was listening carefully. He had used his bluster to draw Morris out. He assumed now an air of indifference as Leighton went on:

"I didn't know that singing could be like that. I don't believe I ever heard anybody sing before! There was something strange about it—almost uncanny—in what seemed to lie back of it."

"You noticed it—you felt it?"

Merriam rose and walked back and forth before the fire, with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

"A savage would feel it. It was as though—"

The old man paused suddenly and glared at Morris.

"Yes, it was like what?" he demanded impatiently.

"Like the cry of a soul in pain. No! you can't tell what it was; but it hurt. It was as though a child had suddenly gained the power to tell of a deep, heart-breaking grief in a great way."

"Yes," Merriam said; and then he added very softly: "Yes, it was like that."

They sat together until late, talking of many things; but they did not refer again to Zelda Dameron.

CHAPTER VII

A PRAYER FOR DIVINE GRACE

Mariona had not, when the Twentieth Century dawned, quite broken with all its traditions. It was still considered bad form to display wealth if you had it; and honest poverty still had sincere admirers among the first citizens. It was better to have had a grandfather who "settled" in the thirties than to be possessed of much money. There had been a time when it was not respectable to stay away from church,—when only here and there some persons, usually called "queer," habitually refused the offices of religion. But the old churches had begun to follow their congregations up-town on the very sensible theory that the individual church is much like any other institution that depends on public support,—it must make itself easy for the public to find.

So, many people continued to go to church in Mariona,—the old element of the community from force of habit and later comers because their neighbors did, which is not to say that all were not moved by religious impulses of the sincerest sort. Though we may not love our neighbors as ourselves in the strictest sense of the commandment we nevertheless like to appear well in their eyes. The sight of Wiggins and Mrs. Wiggins going to church in their best clothes and of the Wiggins chil-

dren, equally splendid, going to Sunday-school, is well calculated to awaken in the Morgansons over the way a worthy ambition to be equally virtuous and splendid. Copeland, the lawyer who never practised, had announced the dictum that in Mariona, to be respectable, a man must pay pew rent and own a lot in Beech Hill cemetery; and Copeland's dicta were entitled to the respectful attention of all men.

Ezra Dameron was of the old order. He still attended all the services of the Central Presbyterian Church, of which he had been a member for forty years. He had held nearly all the offices in the giving of the congregation at one time or another, beginning in his young manhood as secretary of the Sunday-school and gradually rising to be an elder, a position of dignity and honor in the communion, which he held for twenty years. He had lately refused further election, on the plea of advancing years; but he continued a most faithful member of the Central Church, where his pew was under the very shadow of the pulpit.

The hypocrite is not a lovable character; and yet we may sometimes condemn him with an excess of zeal. It is something gained when a bad man realizes, no matter how ignobly, that he must deceive the outer world in order to be countenanced; the only weakness of his position being that he can not wholly deceive himself, though he may go far toward doing so. Ezra Dameron had begun to deteriorate in his young manhood and his pettiness and sordidness had grown steadily. Through many years he had submitted the other cheek and worn a grieved and wounded air, as though the world were using him harshly. His wife's family had not under-

stood him; they had taken his daughter away from him; and now that they had educated her according to their own ideas, they had flung her back upon him, with an injunction to take good care of her lest fierce penalties be visited upon him. He was a martyr, he told himself; and his vision was marred by that form of spiritual myopia which cuts man off from honest self-examination.

Ezra Dameron leaned upon his church—not in a spiritual so much as a social sense. It afforded him the only opportunity he cared for of appearing before his fellows clothed in his old broadcloth coat, that was a veritable garment of righteousness. He was a man of little imagination, but to walk down the long aisle to his pew during the playing of the voluntary, and to hear the hymns and the more ambitious efforts of the choir, and then to settle back for the sermon—these simple experiences touched him, much as a summer breeze plays upon the leafy crest of a rough old tree without communicating any motion to the trunk.

“I usually go to prayer meeting,” said Ezra Dameron to Zelda, one Thursday evening shortly after her homecoming.

“Yes, father.”

She hesitated a moment. She had gone to church with him on Sunday as a matter of course, and she debated now whether to offer to go to the prayer meeting. Her decision was formed suddenly.

“Your mother usually went with me,” her father said.

“I don’t remember. But I should like to go. I shall be ready whenever you are.”

“I shall be glad to have you go when you like. Of

course a young woman often has conflicting engagements. Don't feel bound to go when more tempting things present themselves. I find a certain rest in a mid-week hour of praise and meditation."

He bowed his head a trifle, as was his way in saying something he wished to make impressive.

"Yes; I should think that would be so," said Zelda.

They walked together to the church, where the prayer meeting was held in the Sunday-school room. There were not more than twenty people present, most of them elderly persons. A few young people came, but Zelda did not know them. One was the president of the Christian Endeavor Society; the others were teachers in the Sunday-school.

The pastor, the Reverend Arthur Martin, was a young man, without perceptible phylactery of his calling. He wore a gray sack-coat and a blue four-in-hand tie, and was very good-looking. He read from the Bible and prayed. A hymn followed, and everybody sang, except Zelda. An old gentleman—one of the elders—commented on the passage of Scripture; then prayer was offered by another member of the congregation. The services were simple and unpretentious and had the interest of novelty for Zelda.

It had not occurred to her that her father would participate; he sat deep in meditation during an interval of silence in the room. Presently the minister said:

"Mr. Dameron, please lead in prayer."

The old man rose slowly in his place and after a moment began to speak, his head lifted, his eyes open and gazing at a spot on the wall beyond the minister's head. Zelda's heart beat fast. The experience was wholly new

and dismaying. She felt oppressed, suffocated, as she bowed her head and clasped her hands in her lap. Her father's voice struck strange upon her ears as he made his petition. He seemed in a way transformed and uplifted: the words of his prayer were singularly well chosen as he expressed thanks to God for many blessings. He asked the divine mercy for the sick and for all who walked in the valley of the shadow of death. He prayed that they might be safely restored to health, or, if God willed it, received into the heavenly kingdom. Help was invoked for the church and all other agencies of mercy; for the pastor in his labors, and the Sunday-school, the very foundation and hope of the church.

"Now we especially beg Thy heavenly light upon the parents of this congregation. We thank Thee for the priceless gift of our children. Guide us in Thy infinite wisdom that we may lead them aright. Make us gentle, make us merciful, make us patient, that in all our labors for them we may fall into no error. For the little children, for the young men and women of this household of faith, we beg Thy tenderest care, O merciful Father, for through them Thou wilt lead us to Thy heavenly kingdom at last."

His participation through many years in these services had given Ezra Dameron an easy facility in speaking of divine things. The phraseology of prayer came naturally to his lips; in public devotions a mood of exaltation fell on him; there was a kind of intoxication in this hour in which he found an opportunity for the expression of his faith. These weekly experiences touched his vanity; he knew that his prayers and his testimonies of personal experience were a feature of the Thursday

night meetings; a long line of pastors had spoken to him of his beautiful gift in prayer.

Zelda heard her father's voice with a kind of awe. Prayer still held for her a mystery; she had been taught to pray by her mother, and she had carried through the years a feeling of trust and faith in a power not her own, but it was unrelated to sects or creeds. She had gone to countless churches, while abroad,—but chiefly in the tourist's spirit of adventure. The Merriams had been Presbyterians originally, but as a family they no longer had any unity of religious faith. Mrs. Forrest had married an Episcopalian, and when in Mariona she went at Easter and Christmas to the ivy-clad, stone Gothic church that stood in the shadow of the monument. Rodney Merriam attended no church. When asked as to his religion he always said he was a Roman Catholic, and as he and the Roman Catholic Bishop of Mariona dined together now and then, there were people in town who really believed that Merriam was a Roman communicant.

After another hymn and a benediction the meeting closed. The minister shook hands with Zelda and expressed his pleasure at seeing her; a number of others spoke to her. Some of them looked at her curiously, seeing on their own ground a young woman who was much talked about, and whom they might not have an opportunity of meeting in any other way. The minister's wife, a bright-faced young woman, introduced herself to Zelda.

"It's a joy to see a new face at prayer meeting," she said. "It seems to be an institution for the tried and faithful. I admit that I never went until I was married."

"I think I shall come often," Zelda replied passively.

The pastor's wife was very pretty. She had just come to town from another city, and her fall street-gown was of a fresh and bride-like quality.

"You are the one that sings?" said Mrs. Martin. "I'm just beginning to get acquainted here; but I've heard that about you."

"I'm one of a million amateurs—that's all," replied Zelda.

She walked home with her father, who talked chiefly of the church and its work and the fine promise of the young minister. Zelda said little. Her father was inexplicable to her; but he had begun to fascinate her curiously. She had always accepted the relationships of life as a matter of course. Decency, order, fidelity, were all essential to the ordinary trend of life. "Honor thy father and thy mother" was a commonplace; but tonight she challenged it, as she walked home from prayer meeting by the side of Ezra Dameron. And after she had gone to her room, she wondered about him and saw and heard him again petitioning Heaven. If it had not been for her mother's testimony she could have believed in him.

CHAPTER VIII

OLIVE MERRIAM

Zelda's days ran on now much like those of other girls in Mariona. Between Mrs. Forrest and Mrs. Carr, she was well launched socially, and her time was fully occupied. She overhauled the house and changed its furnishings radically,—while her father blinked at the expenditures. Rodney Merriam, dropping in often to chaff Zelda about her neglect of himself and to beg a little attention, rejoiced at the free way in which she contracted bills. The old mahogany from the garret fitted into the house charmingly. The dingy walls were brightened with new papers; the old carpets were taken up, the floors stained, to save the trouble of putting down hardwood, and rugs bought.

Some of the Mariona merchants, finding Ezra Dameron's name entered on their ledgers for the first time in years, marveled; but after they had seen Zelda, often with her aunt or uncle, making purchases, they were not anxious about the accounts contracted in Dameron's name. A girl who could spend money with so little flourish but with so fine an air in demanding exactly what she wanted, received their best attention without question. No one had ever denied Zelda Dameron anything in her life; and she had formed the habit of asking for

things in a way that made denial impossible. When her aunt complained that the shopkeepers wouldn't do anything for her, Zelda brought them to time by telephone. She knew by experience that her aunt's methods were ineffective. Zelda's way was to ask quite casually that the shades she had bought be hung the same day, as any other time would be inconvenient; and no one ever seemed to have the heart to disappoint her.

Ezra Dameron's greatest shock was the installing of the telephone in his house; but every one else in Marion, so Zelda assured him, had one; and it would undoubtedly be of service to her in many ways. Her real purpose was to place herself in communication with her aunt and uncle, whose help she outwardly refused but secretly leaned on.

Zelda did not disturb the black woman in the kitchen, though she employed a house-maid to supplement her services; but she labored patiently to correct some of the veteran Polly's distressing faults. Polly was a good cook in the haphazard fashion of her kind. She could not read, so that the cook books which Zelda bought were of no use to her. She shook her head over "book cookin'," but Zelda, who dimly remembered that her mother had spent much time in the kitchen, bought a supply of aprons and gave herself persistently to culinary practice. Or, she sat and dictated to Polly from one of the recipe books while that amiable soul mixed the ingredients; and then, after the necessary interval of fear and hope, they opened the oven door and peered in anxiously upon triumph or disaster.

The horse was duly purchased at Lexington, on an excursion planned and managed by Mrs. Carr. They

named the little Hambletonian Xanthippe, which Zelda changed to Zan, at her uncle's suggestion. It was better, he said, not to introduce any more of the remoter letters of the alphabet into the family nomenclature; and as they already had Z it would be unwise to add X. Moreover, it was fitting that Zee should own Zan!

The possession of the pretty brown mare and a runabout greatly increased Zelda's range of activities. Her uncle kept a saddle horse and he taught her how to ride and drive. He also, under Ezra Dameron's very eyes, had the old barn reconstructed, to make a proper abiding-place for a Kentucky horse of at least decent ancestry, and employed a stable-boy.

Zelda became daily more conscious of her father's penurious ways, that were always cropping out in the petty details of the housekeeping. One evening when he thought himself unobserved, she saw him walking down the front stairway, avoiding the carpet on the treads with difficult care. Zelda did not at first know what he was doing; but she soon found this to be only one of his many whimsical economies. He overhauled the pantry now and then, making an inventory of the amount of flour, sugar and coffee in stock, and he still did a part of the marketing. Zelda had given the black stable-boy orders that Zan was to be fed generously; and when she found that her father was giving contrary directions she said nothing, but connived with the boy in the purchase of hay and corn to make good the deficiency caused by her indulgence.

Late one afternoon she drove to a remote quarter of town in pursuit of a laundress that had failed her. She concluded her errand and turned Zan homeward, but lost

her way in seeking to avoid a railway track on which a line of freight cars blocked her path. She came upon a public school building, which presented a stubborn front to a line of shops and saloons on the opposite side of a narrow street. Two boys were engaged in combat on the sidewalk at the school-house entrance, surrounded by a ring of noisy partizans. A young woman, a teacher, Zelda took her to be, hurried toward the scene of trouble from the school-house door, and at her approach the ring of spectators dispersed in disorder, leaving the combatants alone, vainly sparring for an advantage before they, too, yielded the field. Zelda unconsciously drew in her horse to watch the conclusion of matters. The young woman stepped between the antagonists without parley, catching the grimy fists of one of the boys in her hands, while the other took to his heels amid the jeers of the gallery. Zelda heard the teacher's voice raised in sharp reprimand as she dismissed the lad with a wave of her hand that implied an authority not to be gainsaid.

"Pardon me—" Zelda brought her horse to the curb—"but I've lost my way. Can you tell me—"

The young teacher paused.

"Please don't come back—" began Zelda.

The girl stepped to the curb and described the easiest way across town. She was small and trim of figure and had very blue eyes.

"Thank you," said Zelda, and Zan started forward.

"You are Miss Dameron," the teacher said hesitatingly.

"Yes." Zelda turned toward her in surprise.

"It's been a long time since I saw you,—as many as a dozen years." The girl smiled and Zelda smiled, too.

"I wish I could remember. I'm sorry, but won't you help me?"

"It was when you were a little girl—so was I, but I was older—and my mother took me to see your mother, and we played, you and I, that is, in the yard, while our mothers talked. You wore a red dress and I thought you were very grand."

The blue eyes were looking into the dark ones. There was a moment of hesitation and scrutiny. Then Zelda put out her hand.

"You are my cousin. Olive—is it—Merriam?—please don't tell me that isn't right!"

"Yes; that is just right."

Zan, meanwhile, was pawing the dirty street impatiently.

"I'm going to take you home, if you're ready to go, Cousin Olive. I'm badly lost and don't remember the way you told me to go. It's so exciting meeting a long-lost cousin!"

Olive Merriam debated an instant, in which she surveyed her new-found cousin doubtfully. She had started home when the battle at the school-house door gave her pause. There was no excuse for refusing. Zelda had gathered up the reins, and waited.

"Do come! Zan isn't dangerous—and neither am I."

"Thank you. I'll have to come now to show that I'm not afraid."

The boys lingered at a safe distance, and as Zelda drove past them at the corner, several of them snatched

off their caps and grinned, and Olive Merriam called good night to them.

As Zelda followed the route indicated by her cousin, she was busy trying to find a lost strand of family history that proved elusive. She did not at all remember her mother's brother, Thomas Merriam. She had never heard her aunt or uncle speak of the relationship, and she surmised, now that she thought of it, that here must be another of those breaks in the family connection that had already revealed ragged edges. It was growing late, and she put Zan to her best paces, until presently they came out upon a broad paved thoroughfare which offered an open course to Jefferson Street.

"That's better," said Zelda. "I'm sure I should never have found the way out alone. I don't believe I was ever down there before."

"Probably not. It isn't considered highly fashionable."

"It looks interesting, though," said Zelda, remembering that this girl spent her days there at the school-house in the slums. "And I liked the boys."

"I like them," said Olive. "But I don't get a chance at them. I have girls only. I teach—" she laughed in a cheery way that warmed Zelda's heart—"I teach what they call domestic science."

"That sounds very serious."

"But it isn't; it's just cooking!"

"Cooking!" The runabout grazed the fender of a trolley car while the motorman stared and swore as he pounded his gong. They were crossing Jefferson Street where High intersects it. The traffic was always con-

gested here at this hour, and the crowd and noise caused Zan to prick up her ears and toss her head. A stalwart policeman stationed in the middle of the street dodged in an undignified fashion and waved his club after them threateningly.

"You may let me out here anywhere," said Olive, "and I'll take the car."

"Not unless you're frightened. Please let me drive you home. I haven't the least idea where that is, so if I'm going wrong—"

"It's Harrison Street." She described the route. "You're taking a lot of trouble about me."

"No. It's the other way around. I'd never have seen the court-house clock again if it hadn't been for you. And then—" they approached a cross street, and Zelda checked the flight of Zan and bent forward to see whether the coast was clear—"and then"—she loosened the rein and the animal sped forward again—"I've been looking awfully hard for a friend, Cousin Olive, and I want you!"

Olive's blue eyes, that gazed straight ahead over Zan's back, filled with tears.

"It's a dreadful thing in this world to be lonesome—lonesome—lonesome!"

Zelda seemed to be talking to herself. She snapped her whip and Zan's nimble feet struck the asphalt sharply in response.

"You are kind—but you don't understand—a lot of things," said Olive Merriam. "You and I can't be friends. There are reasons—"

"I don't care for any reasons," said Zelda.

"But they're not my reasons—they're other people's!"

That's our house there, where the shades are up and a light is in the window."

"I don't care what other people say about anything,"—and Zelda brought Zan to a stand at the curb in front of Olive's door.

"I'd ask you to stop—" began Olive.

"I'm *going* to stop," said Zelda—"to see you quite on your threshold. Zan stands without hitching, usually. I'll take my chances."

Harrison is only a street in miniature. It lies not far from the heart of town, but so hidden away and with so little communication with the outer world that the uninitiated have difficulty in finding it. It is only a block long, and breathes an air of inadvertence,—of having strayed away from the noise of the city to establish for itself an abode of peace. A poet—the poet that all the people love—wrote a song about it that made it the most famous street in Mariona. The houses there are chiefly one-story-and-a-half cottages, and in one of these, which was saved from intrusive eyes in summer by a double line of hollyhocks, and which had at its back door at seasonable times a charming old-fashioned garden, lived Olive Merriam and her mother.

Olive threw open the door and Zelda stepped into a sitting-room—the house had no hall—where a coal fire burned cozily in a grate. The room ran the length of the house; the woodwork was white; the floor was pine, stained a dull red and covered with rugs made of old carpet. A student lamp with a green shade stood on a table in the center of the room. There were magazines and books on the table, and shelves in the corners held other books. An elderly woman looked up from

the paper she had been reading as the door opened. A cane lay on the floor beside her and told the story of the lines of pain in her face.

"Mother, this is Zelda Dameron. She has brought me home," said Olive.

"She didn't want me to at all, but I made her let me," said Zelda, crossing the room and taking Mrs. Merriam's hand.

The woman bent her eyes—they were blue like Olive's—upon the girl with a grave questioning.

"You are Margaret's daughter—you are Ezra Dameron's daughter," she said.

"Yes; and I didn't know about you at all until I found Olive to-day. And I didn't know that any Merriams anywhere lived in a house like this. Why, it's a home!"

Olive had brought a chair for Zelda, and stood watching her mother anxiously.

"Please—I'm going—but tell me—that I may come back again."

There was something so sincere and wistful in Zelda's tone as she spoke, standing between the firelight and the lamplight; something, too, in the glance of appeal she gave the little room, that broke down the antagonism in Mrs. Merriam's eyes. She put out her hand again.

"Yes; I hope you will come. We shall be glad to see you."

"*Et vous?*" Zelda turned to Olive with a quick gesture. "You must say it, too!"

"Certainly—Cousin Zelda! Saturday or Sunday, always—in the afternoons."

"Saturday—that's three days to wait—please don't forget! Good night!"

Olive followed Zelda to the steps, and saw the run-about turn in the narrow street and whirl away. She watched it until Zelda's erect figure passed like a flash under the electric light at the corner and disappeared into the dark beyond.

"What miracle is this?" asked Mrs. Merriam of Olive.

"Nothing short of a miracle would account for it."

"I met her down at the school-house. She had lost her way and asked me how to find Jefferson Street. I called her by name,—she seemed to remember me, and then she insisted on bringing me home. She seemed rather pitiful; she said she was lonesome and wanted a friend."

Olive sat down on a stool at her mother's feet. She was afraid to show too much interest in this new-found cousin. Her mother was clearly puzzled and troubled; the moment was difficult; but she felt that it was important to determine their future relations with Zelda Dameron now.

"She is so very like her mother. It gave me a shock to see her. Margaret had that same impulsive way. In any one else it would have seemed strained and theatrical, but no one ever thought of it in Margaret. Every one always said, when she did anything a little odd, that it was just like Margaret Dameron. Your father hadn't any of that; he wasn't like the rest of the Merriams. He tried to be on good terms with Ezra Dameron, though Ezra never appreciated it; and the rest of them dropped us for countenancing him. But Zelda,—what do you think of her?"

"She didn't give me time to think. She charmed me! I never saw anybody like her in the world. She has such an air of mystery,—that doesn't seem just the word, but

I don't know what to call it. She's adorable! And when we were driving along in the dark and she said she was 'lonesome, lonesome, lonesome,' just that way, it made me cry."

"I've heard that she has gone to live with her father. They can have nothing in common. She will hardly be happy with him."

"I should think not! I can't imagine her living with him. Yes,—I can imagine her doing anything!"

"I believe I can, too," said Mrs. Merriam, smiling. "And if she's disposed to be friendly we mustn't repel her."

"No one could refuse an appeal like hers. I'm only afraid she'll never come back. She's like a fairy princess. I don't remember that anything so interesting ever happened to me before. But I must come down to the realities and go and get tea."

Zelda appeared in a rain-storm early Saturday afternoon. Olive had spent the morning at a teachers' meeting and hurried through luncheon to be prepared for Zelda in case she should come. Zelda appeared afoot, wrapped in a long rain-coat.

"Don't be alarmed about me! I'm neither sugar, salt nor anybody's honey. I never had a cold in my life," she declared, as the two women exclaimed at her drenched appearance. Olive helped her out of the coat and bore it away to the kitchen, and then took Zelda to her own room, where there was more white woodwork, with draperies of pink and white in the dormer-windows.

"I know; I see through it all; you didn't really want me to fix my dripping locks, but to see this. Isn't it too good to be true? It's like a little room I had once at a

place in Italy, only better. It's very bad form to look; but I'm looking." Zelda went about peering at pictures, touching draperies swiftly with her hands; and at Olive's dresser she availed herself of comb and brush and restored her hair with a few strokes. "Now, Cousin Olive, I don't know what girls have to say to each other when they're all alone. This is a new experience. So you begin."

She took a rocking-chair that was covered with chintz of the same pattern as the curtains, and faced Olive, who sat down in a little window seat where there were cushions that matched the chintz. The room was small and cozy. The rain beat on the shingles overhead and against the windows with a soothing monotony.

"Mine are the brief and simple annals of the poor," said Olive.

"That sounds like poetry. I don't know any poetry. Tell me"—Zelda bent forward in her chair and dropped her voice to a whisper—"tell me, Cousin Olive, are you educated?"

Olive laughed aloud.

"I'm sorry to admit it, but I went to Drexel Institute, where they teach girls to be practical; I didn't go for fun; I went for business. They teach the useful arts, and I learned, among other things, to be humble."

"I don't believe you learned humility. Maybe humility was,—what do they call it,—a snap course?"

"I'm not sure that I learned it," said Olive.

"You must get over it if you did. Now, go on, and don't let me interrupt you any more."

"Then I came home and began to teach in the pub-

lic schools what they call, as I told you, domestic science,—which means cooking.”

“Wonderful!”

“Not very. Nothing could be simpler. They’re trying it on to see how it goes; so there’s a certain responsibility in my work. It will mean a lot to the children of the poor if they can learn how to do things decently and in order; and if I don’t make my slum cooking go the powers will cut it off. I thought for a while about becoming a trained nurse, though mother protested against it. But I was cured of that. I went down to St. Luke’s Hospital to see if they would take me. The boss nurse, whatever they call her, looked me over and asked if I wanted to learn nursing because I had been disappointed in love! Think of it! It seems that many girls do go in for it when they’ve been disappointed. But that didn’t apply to me; so they refused to take me because I was so little. I suppose I *am* rather undersized,” said Olive, ruefully. “I should like to be a nurse. The girls look so stunning in their uniform. But that’s all there is about me. Mother is often ill and never very strong. We live alone here and don’t see many people and nothing ever happens.”

“It seems to me that a good deal happens. Now nothing really ever does happen to me. And I’m most shamelessly ignorant. They didn’t send me to school; my Aunt Julia kept me moving. I’ve lived in a trunk so long that it seems to me the lid is always crowding down on top of my head.”

She shrugged her shoulders and put up her hands as though to protect herself from an imaginary trunk-lid.

“Oh, but to see things and places and people!”

"But you *don't* see them,—when you're traveling with your aunt! Then you go boldly into a beautiful city and are taken in a closed carriage to a hotel, or worse yet, a *pension*, and you are warned not to speak to any one, particularly to any one that looks interesting, for the interesting people usually have something wrong with them. *Isn't* it strange that the interesting people are always wicked? I know that from personal experience."

Olive was listening to her cousin's talk with a happy light in her eyes and the smile that forever hovered about her pretty mouth.

"It isn't so funny, I would have you know! to be dragged around, always in a carriage, mind you, to look at only the most respectable ruins, and statues of people that labored for some noble cause and had so little sense they lost their heads. I worked for weeks in Paris before Aunt Julia would let me see Napoleon's tomb. And all because his domestic life was not what it should be! As though that mattered, when he made those silly old dynasties over there gasp for breath."

Zelda's voice,—its depth and music, and the elusive disappearing note in it, wove an enchantment for Olive. Her own life had been colorless and practical; but she had her dreams, and her cousin Zelda seemed a realization of some of them.

"Anything is better than not going at all!"

"Maybe so. But I had tutors—queer people that came to teach me French and German. That was odious, most odious."

"I'm sure you know a lot. You can't help knowing a lot."

"I don't know a thing,—not a single blessed thing."

And if you won't tell any one,—if you will let this be an awful secret between you and me, a compact to end only with death,—I'll confide to you that I don't care! I'm very, very wicked, Cousin Olive. I always want to do things I'm told not to. When my dear charming father—he's perfectly dear and lovely—talks to me about politics and tells me that the Republicans stand for the holy principles on which this glorious republic was founded, I decide at once that I'm a Democrat. George Washington must have been an awful bore. If the English weren't the dullest and stupidest people in the world they would have whipped him out of his boots. Now, don't you see what an impossible person I am? My father's the kindest, best man in the world,—he's always so thoughtful,—always doing things for me, and yet sometimes his very goodness makes this same kind of wickedness rise up in me! Some day, some day, Cousin Olive, I'm going to be good myself; but just now goodness,—goodness makes me very tired. And now," she went on with a change of manner and waiting for no comment from her intent and puzzled listener, "would you mind telling me how you get white woodwork like this? Do you have to get the plumber or whatever-his-name-is to do that?"

"The way I did that," said Olive, "was to take twenty-five cents down to a shop where they sell paint all ready for the feminine hand to apply, and buy a can of it and do the painting myself. It's rather fun."

"Perfectly delicious! My room is all black walnut, and I loathe it. And things like these," she indicated the curtains,—“how do you find them?"

"I'll tell you my system, but it won't appeal to you.

I go to the cheapest shop in town, where no carriages ever stop at the front door, and where the women go in with their market baskets. I ask to see the cheapest chintz they have; and then I pick out the least ugly stuff in the bunch and carry it home."

"Tremendous! It isn't polite at all for me to be asking; but Aunt Julia is as ignorant as I am. She sends her maid to do her shopping."

"That's real luxury."

"No, it isn't. It's no fun at all. You can't imagine what it means to me to learn a little about how human beings live. Ever since I grew up I've lived on the outside of things, and I'm tired of it."

"You ought to be very happy," said Olive.

"That's what I detest about things,—the *oughts*. That's why the *oughtn'ts* seem so attractive. But you won't mind, will you, all this queer rigmarole of mine? Please don't tell your mother,—I want her to like me, too, and she never could if she knew what wild ideas I have."

"We like you very much, Cousin Zelda," said Olive, gravely. She rose from her seat and crossed to where Zelda stood and put her hands on her cousin's shoulders. Zelda seemed to look down on Olive from an ampler ether; but her little kinswoman offered anchorage and security. She brushed the soft light hair from Olive's brow caressingly and bent and kissed her.

"We understand, don't we?" she said happily, stepping back and catching both her cousin's hands.

"And now," said Olive, "let us go down and make some tea and drink to the compact."

CHAPTER IX

A NICE LITTLE FELLOW

Rodney Merriam and Morris Leighton walked up High Street to the Tippecanoe Club, which occupied a handsome old brick mansion that had been built by one of the Merriams who had afterward lost his money. Merriam usually went there late every afternoon to look over the newspapers, and to talk to the men who dropped in on their way home. He belonged also to the Hamilton, a much larger and gayer club that rose to the height of five stories in the circular plaza about the soldiers' monument at the heart of the city; but he never went there, for it was noisy and full of politics. Many young men fresh from college belonged to the Tippecanoe, and Merriam liked to talk to them. He was more constant to the club than Morris, though they often went there together.

A number of men were sitting about the fireplace in the lounging-room. The lazily blazing logs furnished the only light.

A chorus of good evenings greeted the two men in unmistakable cordiality, and the best chair in the room was pushed toward Rodney Merriam.

"Mr. Merriam, Captain Pollock; and Mr. Leighton."

A young man rose and shook hands with the new-

comers. Merriam did not know most of the group by name. He had reached the age at which it seems unnecessary to tax the memory with new burdens. It was, he held, good club manners to speak to all the men you meet in a club, whether you know them or not. The youngsters at the Tippecanoe were for the greater part college graduates, just starting out in the world and retaining a jealous hold of their youth through the ties of the club.

"The Arsenal's got to go. They're going to sell it and build a post farther out in the country," announced one of the group. "It's all settled at Washington to-day."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It's another landmark gone," said Merriam.

"Good for the town, though," said a voice in the dark.

"Everything that's unpleasant is," declared the old gentleman.

Merriam's tippie had been brought. It was bourbon whisky, off the wood. A keg of it was sent to him by a friend in Louisville every Christmas. As Merriam was occasionally away from town for a year or two at a time the kegs accumulated, so he kept one at the club, and when his order was whisky a bottle was always ready for him. Once when these youngsters had thought to practise deceit by substituting a bottle of the usual club rye for his private tippie, he had detected it by the smell before tasting; for there were a good many things that Rodney Merriam knew, and the difference between Pennsylvania rye and Kentucky bourbon was not the least of them.

"The ordnance people move out in a day or two," con-

tinued the voice in the dark, "and a company of infantry will be here to hold things down until the sale is made. Captain Pollock has been assigned to lay off the lines of the new fort."

Merriam was holding his glass up to the light in his lean brown fingers. The name of the young man he had been introduced to had touched a chord of memory; and he continued to hold his glass before him so that he could see the clear amber of the liquor in the firelight. He was thinking very steadily and very swiftly. The soft voice of Pollock rose in the shadow almost at his elbow.

"If it isn't *lèse-majesté* I'd like to say that I'm sorry the department is making the change. The Arsenal grounds are beautiful. I shouldn't think the people of Mariona would want to change the place at all, even to get a large post. I envy all the fellows who have had stations here in the past."

"They have been mighty good fellows," said Rodney Merriam. "I've known most of them—all Civil War veterans, and men we have been glad to know here in town. So Major Congrieve will have to move on! He's a good fellow and we'll miss him, but he's near the retiring age."

"He'll retire next year," said the same voice. It was our southern American voice, soft and well modulated, with the Italian *a* that the South has preserved inviolate.

Merriam had not drained his glass. He continued to speak, without turning his head.

"Those are hard words, young gentlemen,—retiring age. It's a polite way of saying shelf. I'm on the shelf myself, and it's dusty."

"Never!" protested Leighton. "The rest of us are



Morris Leighton

sliding on the banana skins of time—how is that?—right into the grave; while you stand by like the god of youth and mock us.”

Merriam saluted them with his glass and drank it out.

“Captain Pollock has been telling us about the Philippines,” said another one of the group. “We’ve been trying to find out whether he’s an imperialist or how about it, but he won’t tell.”

“That shows his good judgment,” said Merriam.

“It shows that I want to keep my job,” declared Pollock, cheerfully. “And I’ll be cashiered now for certain, if I don’t get back to the Arsenal. Major Congrieve expects me for dinner.”

Baker, who had brought Pollock to the club, shook himself out of his chair and the others rose.

“I’ll see that you find your way back to the reservation,” said Baker.

“That’s very kind of you. And I’m glad to have met you, Mr. Merriam.”

It was the soft voice again, and as they went out into the hall, Merriam looked at the owner of it with interest. He was a slim young fellow, with friendly blue eyes, brown hair, and a slight mustache. His carriage was that of the drilled man. West Point does not give a degree in the usual academic sense; but she writes something upon her graduates that is much more useful for purposes of identification. Frank Pollock had been the shortest man in his class; but his scant inches were all soldierly. The young men with whom he had spent an hour at the Tippecanoe Club had been gathered up by Baker, who had met Pollock somewhere and taken a fancy to him. They all left the club together except

Merriam and Leighton, who went to the newspaper room. But Merriam stared at the evening paper without reading it, and when he got up to go presently, he stopped at the club register which lay open on a desk in the hall. He put on his eye-glasses and scanned the page. The ink was fresh on the last signature:

FRANK POLLOCK, U. S. A.

Rodney Merriam then walked toward his own house, tapping the sidewalk abstractedly with his stick.

The next morning he called for his horse early. He kept only one horse, for he never drove; but he rode nearly every day when it was fair. His route was usually out High Street toward the country; but to-day he rode down-town through the monument plaza and then struck east over the asphalt of Jefferson Street, where a handsome old gentleman of sixty, riding a horse that was remembered with pride at Lexington, was not seen every day. Rodney Merriam was thinking deeply this morning, and the sharp rattle of his horse's hoofs on the hard pavement did not annoy him as it usually did.

Arsenal is a word that suggests direful things, but the Arsenal that had been maintained through many peaceful years at Mariona, until the town in its growth leaped over the government stone walls and extended the urban lines beyond it, was really a pretty park. The residences of the officers and several massive storehouses were, at least, inoffensive to the eye. The native forest trees were aglow with autumn color, and laborers were collecting and carrying away dead leaves.

Merriam brought his horse to a walk as he neared the

open gates. A private came out of the little guard-house and returned Merriam's salute. The man gazed admiringly after the military figure on the thoroughbred, though he had often seen rider and horse before, and he knew that Mr. Merriam was a friend of Major Congrieve, the commandant. The soldier continued to stare after Rodney Merriam, curious to see whether the visitor would bring his hand to his hat as he neared the flag that flapped high overhead. He was not disappointed; Rodney Merriam never failed to salute the colors, even when he was thinking hard; and he was intent upon an idea this morning.

The maid who answered the bell was not sure whether Major Congrieve was at home; he had been packing, she said; but the commandant appeared at once and greeted his caller cordially.

Major Congrieve was a trifle stout, but his gray civilian clothes made the best of a figure that was not what it had been. He was bald, and looked much better in a hat than without it.

"You'll pardon me for breaking in on your packing. I merely came to register a kick. I don't seem to know any of the local news any more until it's stale. I've just heard that the Arsenal has been sold and I want to say that it's an outrage to tear this place to pieces."

"It is too bad; but I don't see what you are going to do about it. I've already got my walking papers. The incident is closed as far as I am concerned."

"To give us an active post in exchange for the Arsenal is not to do us a kindness. We've got used to you gentlemen of the ordnance. Your repose has been an inspiration to the community."

"No irony! The town has always been so good to me and mine that we've had no chance for repose."

"But the Spanish War passed over and never touched you. I don't believe the powers at Washington knew you were here."

"Oh yes, they did. They wired me every few hours to count the old guns in the storehouse, until I knew every piece of that old scrap iron by heart. If we'd used those old guns in that war, the row with Spain would have been on a more equal basis."

"I suppose it would," said Merriam, who was thinking of something else. "But I'm sorry you're going to leave. We never quite settled that little question about Shiloh; and I'm convinced that you're wrong about the Fitz-John Porter case."

"Well, posterity will settle those questions without us. And would you mind walking over to the office with me—"

"Bless me, I must be going! This was an unpardonable hour for a call."

"Not in the least; only I've another caller over there—Pollock, of the quartermaster's department, who has been sent out to take charge of the new post site. He's a nice chap; you must know him."

"I'll be very glad, some other time," said Merriam. "Which way does he come from?"

"He's a southern boy. Father was a Johnny Reb. Another sign that the war is over and the hatchet buried."

"Pollock, did you say? Tennessee family? I seem to remember the name."

"I think so. Yes. I'm sure. I looked him up in the register."

Merriam tapped his riding boot with the whip he had kept in his hand.

"Yes; the war's over," he said, "our war. There's been another since, but it's preposterous to call that Spanish dress-parade and target practice war."

The two men went out together, and Major Congrieve twitted Merriam about the thoroughbred's pedigree.

"I'll see you again before you go. Luncheon to-morrow at the Tippecanoe Club? That is well. Good morning!"

As Merriam rode out toward the street, Captain Pollock came from one of the storehouses and walked briskly across the grounds in the direction of the office. A curve in the path brought him face to face with Rodney Merriam, who saluted him with his right hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Merriam!" and the young officer lifted his hat.

Captain Pollock's eyes followed the horseman to the gate.

"I don't know who you are, Mr. Merriam, or what you do," he reflected, "but the sight of that horse makes me homesick."

"He's a nice little fellow," Merriam was saying to himself, as he passed the gate and turned toward the city. "He's a nice little fellow; and so was his father!"

As the thoroughbred bore him rapidly back to town, Rodney Merriam several times repeated to himself abstractedly: "He's a nice little fellow!"

CHAPTER X

THE RIVER ROAD

Rodney Merriam's efforts to manage Zelda had not thus far been wholly satisfactory. He might, under ordinary circumstances, have submitted to what seemed to be the inevitable, but he had never in his life tamely accepted defeat. He could not take the forts by storm; he would lay siege to them, and so he planned a long campaign. Zelda's intractability was as annoying as it was charming. He scolded her, and she laughed at him; he gave orders and she disobeyed. He appealed to her pride by declaring that the town was gossiping about her, and she replied that being talked about was better than being ignored. She twitted him freely about his air of mystery and asked him questions so frankly impertinent that it was easy for him to parry them. There seemed to be an ill-defined line between the child and the woman; and he was never quite sure on which side of this faint boundary she stood.

Merriam liked to ride with her, and they explored many highways and byways in the bright fall days. She forgot the dull house and her strange father in the company of Rodney Merriam, whose own youth revived in her company.

They came one bright blue afternoon in late October

to "the river road," as it was called. It rose at one point to a considerable height for this flat country, and when they reached it to-day they drew up their horses as usual to enjoy the view. The soft wind that came out of the south and fanned their faces might have been a wind of May. The woodland back of them was glorious with autumn color,—deep red and gold dominant, but with a single tree standing forth here and there in unbroken green. A stake-and-rider fence inclosed the wood and crept on down the road. On the other side lay the bluff, and below it the river with its broad bed and sadly depleted channel. Across the stream stood a group of sycamores, and beyond them lay farms, at peace in the clear, still afternoon.

Zelda and her uncle reined in their horses and viewed the tranquil beauty of the scene with satisfaction. Farm hands were clearing a bit of land farther down-stream and their voices rose in the quiet air. Merriam suggested that the men were skirmishers and that an army lay behind them and would soon swing into view.

"What a place this is for a little artillery work," he continued. "Those fellows are marching up the river—foolish too, to get caught in a place like that, with a bluff on one side and a river on the other."

"But they could cross the river,—the gentlemen on horseback, whatever you call them."

"Cavalry, my child."

"Beg pardon, sir!" She lifted her hand to her riding hat. "It's an awfully poor little stream. The foot soldiers could walk across."

"There's a courier now, just riding down to the water."

Merriam pointed across the river. A horseman appeared there suddenly, glancing up and down the little valley. He had left the town road and followed a faint fisherman's trail to the water.

"He'd be an easy mark for a sharp-shooter," Merriam remarked.

"Too easy. There wouldn't be anything very splendid in murdering a man that way. You have to slay them in bunches to make it glorious. He's probably a farmer looking for his cows."

"Wrong again. He's in proper riding clothes, I should say."

"He's going to spoil them, *I* should say!"

The horseman had forced his reluctant mount to the water's edge.

"He's actually going to cross!"

Merriam looked down with a professional eye. The horse was acting badly, and the rider was urging it with voice and spur. In a moment the splashing of the water could be heard plainly by the spectators. The stream was of uneven depth, and the horse lost its footing for a few yards but swam boldly on.

"By Jove! That fellow knows his business," ejaculated Merriam.

The rider had got out of the stirrups and was standing on his saddle crouching low over the horse, which for a minute was submerged.

"He must be a circus performer," declared Zelda.

"No; the government has a school on the Hudson where they teach tricks like that."

"Oh, a West Pointer! But what's he doing here?"

"Let's get out of this," said the old gentleman, tightening the hold on his reins and ignoring her question.

He had been watching the horseman closely and his keen old eyes had recognized an acquaintance.

"Not run from the enemy! I am surprised at you, *mon oncle!*"

"Come on," he said, over his shoulder.

But Zelda smiled at him.

"Maybe he's good-looking," she observed. "And then, we ought to help him find his cattle."

Merriam rode on and she followed. The rider was now out of sight under the bluff, but they could hear his horse's hoofs on the low sandy shore. Merriam knew the locality perfectly. There was no way of getting up the bluff at this point, he was sure; but he did not care to meet Captain Pollock, and he walked his horse smartly along the road.

"You might let me see him," said Zelda, riding at his side. "I'd like to know a man who could ride like that."

"Humph! I could do it myself."

"I shan't dare you; I really think you might try it,—such is the vanity of age."

At the side of the road nearest the river was a thin low growth of bushes. Suddenly there was a crash in the scanty hedge just ahead of the two riders and a clatter of broken clods that rolled down with a lively thump.

Merriam drew up with an exclamation as Captain Pollock drove his horse over the edge of the bluff into the road directly in their path. The animal's flanks still dripped and it was blowing hard from the climb.

"Pardon me!" said Captain Pollock, smiling. He backed his panting horse to the edge of the road and lifted his hat. His riding boots were wet from their contact with water, but he was calm and unruffled.

"Good afternoon," Merriam replied curtly.

"I hope I didn't startle you, Mr. Merriam. I didn't know that there was any one up here. I was trying to find a new road home."

He looked from Zelda to her uncle inquiringly.

"This pike leads directly into town," said Merriam, pointing over his shoulder. "Good day, sir!"

He spurred his horse forward, Zelda following; and in a moment Captain Pollock was staring blankly at the blur of dust that enveloped them.

"Well, my dear uncle," began Zelda, when they had turned a bend in the road, "I'd like an explanation of this very amazing conduct."

She brought her horse to a walk and touched her uncle's arm with her riding whip.

"What's the matter?" asked Merriam.

"Don't try to play the innocent! Why didn't you introduce me to that courier? You hurried me off as though he were the basest of all earth's creatures, instead of—"

"Instead of what?"

"Why, instead of an exceedingly handsome young man. He's about the best I've seen."

"He is, is he?"

"That's what I said! Don't compel me to be impertinent. He had very nice blue eyes; and when he took off his hat his head was very good. I quite liked the way

he parted his hair. He was really stunning and I'd have liked to be introduced. But what is his name?"

Merriam was looking straight over his horse's head and pretended that he did not hear.

"Well, sir?"

"I don't know the fellow," said the old gentleman, shortly.

"Oh! He seemed to know you."

"Humph! It was very unnecessary."

"He addressed you respectfully by your proper name. You were very impolite to him. He had all the marks of a gentleman."

"I don't know all the people that call me by name;" and Rodney Merriam ended the conversation by bringing his horse to a gallop.

When they parted presently at Zelda's door, Rodney Merriam had forgotten the incident of the meeting on the river road, or he pretended that he had, when Zelda said with a fine air of inadvertence:

"Of course, I'll meet him sometime, somewhere, as the song says."

"What's that?" demanded her uncle.

He had turned his horse to leave, and she stood on the sidewalk stroking Zan's pretty nose.

"I said that I'd probably meet the chevalier sooner or later."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," declared the old gentleman, testily, and he rode off with considerable haste toward his own stable.

Frank Pollock was a good deal puzzled by Rodney Merriam's action on the river road. He did not ques-

tion that the old gentleman had recognized him; even if he had not, strangers passing on the highway in this part of the world usually saluted one another. Pollock was a fellow whose amiability had always made friends for him; he had been petted to the spoiling point by men and women in different parts of the republic, and as he watched Rodney Merriam and Zelda Dameron gallop away from him his face grew crimson. Pollock had not seen Zelda Dameron before, but he assumed that she was a relative of Rodney Merriam's,—a fact which he deplored as the dust from their horses was driven back upon him.

It was, however, ordained by the powers that the meeting in the highway between Pollock and Zelda should not be their last. Mrs. Michael Carr had already discovered the young officer. She always discovered new people in town and was not happy until she had summoned them to her board. Her round table seated eight people comfortably, and she much preferred this small number to the twenty that were possible. Wishing to see Zelda at closer range, she made a small dinner—quite *en famille*—and bade Zelda and Pollock, the Copelands, Mrs. Forrest and Morris Leighton to her board. Michael Carr was fond of talk; to say that he was himself a conversationalist was not making too much of it. He even enjoyed the surprise of coming down to his drawing-room and finding utter strangers there,—often persons whom Mrs. Carr had met in the many clubs and societies of which she was a member.

“I am almost afraid to suggest that we may have

met before," said Pollock to Zelda, when they were seated at the table.

"I didn't suppose a soldier was ever afraid," replied Zelda, non-committally.

"I intimated," repeated Pollock, "that I had seen you before. If you wish to ignore the fact—"

"Oh, I shouldn't do that. I remember—the horse—perfectly!"

"Thank you!"

"And you ride pretty well!"

"Again thanks! I had a dim impression that you rode well yourself. But you and your escort seemed anxious to cast a cloud of dust upon your merits. My glimpse was only fleeting."

"Let me see. We did go off rather hastily. Oh yes! You frightened our horses; I remember now! We had paused to admire the landscape when you burst upon us suddenly and put our steeds to flight."

They laughed at this ingenuous explanation and paused to heed a bit of by-play between their hostess and Copeland on the labor question. Every one contributed to the talk until the hostess, who professed radical views, changed the subject.

"Colonel Merriam is your—"

"Mr. Merriam, please. He's my uncle. He doesn't allow any one to call him colonel."

"I beg your pardon, and his! He's unique if he doesn't care for a title. He was an officer, wasn't he, in the Civil War?"

"He was something; but he never mentions it." Then brightly, with her frankest air: "You may have met him during the war."

"Thank you, immensely! My enemies have always charged me with extreme youth. I am grateful beyond any words for the years you credit me with! But we were rebels. Please don't be shocked; my people were all rebels."

"How delightful! I don't believe I ever saw one before. How did the war come out? Oh yes! We whipped you, didn't we?"

"That's conceded, I believe. I wasn't born for a decade after it was all over, or I'd never have surrendered. But the government forgave us and let me go to West Point; so here we all are again, and I'm glad of it!"

Frank Pollock was undoubtedly a very agreeable young man, and Zelda Dameron liked him. When he said good night he asked if he might call on her, and Zelda said yes, certainly, though she remembered her uncle's treatment of Captain Pollock on the river road very well. She knew of no reason why she should not be polite to Captain Pollock, whose manners and conversation were quite to her liking. If her uncle knew any real reason why Captain Pollock was not a proper person for her to know, he might say so.

CHAPTER XI

OVERHEARD BY EZRA DAMERON

“As a community we are nearly one hundred years old. We are an enlightened and prosperous people. Ours is a city of homes,—a city in which every man, no matter how humble, may have his own fireside; a city in which the American element has always dominated; a city finely expressive of the best in our native soil. Shame be upon us if we fail in these endeavors to aid and protect the unfortunate among us! And this appeal I speak not primarily for the societies here represented, but for the founders of our commonwealth,—in the name of the sincere and devoted men and women who planned this city and laid its foundations broad and deep, that we who follow them need never waver or hesitate or doubt in doing the work we find to do.”

Such was the close of an address given by Morris Leighton at the annual meeting of the Mariona Organized Charity Society. The society was facing several serious financial problems and this public meeting had been called at the Grand Opera House early in the fall, that support might be asked for the winter's work. Michael Carr was president of the society and he had appointed Leighton to make this address, wishing, as he told the board of directors, to interest the younger

generation in the work which the elders had carried on for so long that the public had grown tired of seeing and hearing them. Leighton was an effective speaker, and Carr had assigned him to this address with confidence that the society's appeal would be spoken in a way to impress the large audience that always attended the society's meetings.

A few evenings later Morris called on Zelda. It was now November and winter's skirmish line had reached Mariona. A fire blazed in the grate of the parlor, which Zelda's care had now brightened in many ways. She had found in the garret a handsome brass lamp, decorated with a fringe of crystals, and this became well an old table, which had been transferred from its traditional place in the center of the room to a more effective spot between the windows. Mr. Dameron shook hands with Leighton, whom he had seen often in the office of Knight, Kittredge and Carr, and several times at home. He had expected that young men would come to call on his daughter, now that she had returned to his roof, for this was the way of things in Mariona, and he wished Zelda to have the same liberty and the same advantages that other girls enjoyed. If her uncle and aunt expected him to deal churlishly with the girl and make a prisoner of her he would not gratify them. And there was a particular reason why Leighton's appearance at the house interested him, for, with him as with Mrs. Forrest and Rodney Merriam, the young man's name carried a certain suggestion which, in Ezra Dameron's case, was not wholly pleasant.

Ezra Dameron had a sense of the proprieties, and he sat down and talked to Leighton amiably. There

was a wide margin between a social and a business acquaintance; and Ezra Dameron studied Michael Carr's chief clerk with interest in the few minutes that intervened before Zelda came down. There was a strange light in the old man's eyes as he watched them greet each other. He went out presently to the sitting-room, and before his own fire he pondered long as the voices in the parlor stole out to him.

"I believe this is my fourth appearance, but Mrs. Forrest said I might come; and I hope I may refer confidently to your uncle."

"I suppose you have to get some sort of permit to leave him for an evening. He never asks *me* for evenings alone."

"It's his natural gallantry. He's afraid he might not prove sufficiently interesting by himself. Quite possibly he's afraid of you!"

"I have always understood that he wasn't afraid of anything."

"I think he's a little afraid of inaction. He hates very much the idea of having nothing to do but to take care of himself. He has been about so much,—always, let us say, looking for the moose!"

Zelda smiled at this reference to their talk at her uncle's house. Zelda had been often in Morris's mind since his first sight of her at Mrs. Carr's tea. He had speculated and wondered about her, as a young man will about any girl he meets who appeals to his imagination. Carr, in speaking to him from time to time of matters connected with Ezra Dameron's business, had let fall his own impression of the old man; and while he always spoke with entire respect and loyalty of his client,

Leighton understood that Dameron's business had grown irksome to the lawyer. Morris knew, too, that Dameron's reputation in the community was not enviable; and he had heard the gossip occasioned by Zelda's return, with its note of misgiving as to the girl's future.

Zelda was decidedly not an object of pity, but the knowledge that every one was praising her piqued him, and he found himself anxious to find her wanting. Her hair was carried up from her forehead in the prevailing mode; there was no special distinction in that. Her dark eyes were fine; but he knew other girls with dark hair and eyes; and he had seen other girls move with the same ease and grace,—at least, he told himself that he had. She wore a plain house-gown with trimmings in orange, and an orange ribbon at her throat. He had certainly looked upon finer raiment. But he hated himself for thus making an inventory; for in the end he knew that he was sure of nothing save that she was Zelda Dameron, and that she interested and puzzled him in curious ways.

"I heard your speech," said Zelda.

"Then I hope you were moved to give of your substance to the poor."

"Well, I haven't contributed anything yet."

"Oh!"

Leighton's speech had been praised generously by his friends, and the newspapers had said a good word for it. One of them was carrying an extract from it in large black type in a conspicuous place at the head of its editorial page. He was aware that he awakened in Zelda Dameron a certain antagonism; she did not ap-

prove of him. He was not conceited, but her attitude irritated him.

"You have a very good voice for speaking." Then, after a pause—"My uncle says so."

"Thank you!"

"And I'll say, on my own account, that you don't make gestures,—trying to get things out of the air, like a *prestidigitateur*. I haven't heard many speeches, but most of the orators I have heard have been tiresome."

"And—?"

"Oh, you weren't so dreadfully tiresome! I have heard a great many that were far more depressing. But there was one thing that occurred to me—"

"Pray tell me the worst!"

"It seemed to me, as you stood there talking to that theater full of solemn people, that you must be awfully good; and I felt almost sorry for you."

She said this with her eyes bent upon him seriously, and his face flushed. He replied quickly:

"Of course it was assumed. It was a necessity, a part of the game, as we may say. I had been cast for the part, and had to give the best imitation possible."

"To be sure. I suppose we all have to play a part sometimes," she said. Her words carried no sympathy, but seemed to express a conviction about which there was no debating, one way or another.

He said nothing, feeling uneasy and uncertain of his ground. She waited a moment and then went on:

"There are things I should like to do if I were good, awfully good. I should like to go about among the poor with little baskets of jelly, and bottles of home-

made currant wine, and some real home-made bread of my own baking, and bestow them upon the worthy poor; but I never could make up my mind to do it. I think the idea of giving tickets to tramps, so they may go to the charity society office for inspection before they are given a chance to saw a cord or two of wood before breakfast, is hideously un-Christian. I don't like your idea of making a business of philanthropy."

"It isn't my idea," said Leighton. "Please don't identify me with all that you don't like about organized charities."

"No; I shan't; but the idea suggested itself that we ought to do better for the tramps than that. Just imagine, Mr. Leighton, how *you* would feel if *you* rang a door-bell,—suppose you were to ring ours!—and some one would thrust a ticket through a crack and beg you to run along and pass an examination somewhere before you could hope for a crust of bread!"

Leighton laughed.

"I think in your case I should keep the ticket as a souvenir."

"Oh, it wouldn't be my case; it would be the maid's. She keeps the tickets."

"So that to get a dime I should have to see you."

"I'm afraid so; and I should have to ask you whether you intended to buy bread or drink with it. They always do,—the scientific philanthropists. Then they can report their observations to some dreary headquarters somewhere for tabulation. I think I should always tell my tramps to buy good whisky; they say it's so much more wholesome than bad bread!"

"I've been told so, too, if you are appealing to me!"

"But *everything* in your speech wasn't bad! You spoke quite nobly of the founders of the city. I felt a thrill for my grandfather. I suppose you have always lived here, too."

In the living-room Ezra Dameron had put down his newspapers and was reading his Bible. Leighton could see him plainly from where he sat, beyond Zelda's shoulder. Her father's profile was as sharp and hard as though it were cut in granite. It made a curious, incongruous background for the graceful head, with its crown of dead black hair, the soft curving cheeks, and the deep, serious eyes of the girl.

"No; we are country folk. My father came from Mills County,—there weren't really any mills there to speak of, but a great educator of that name lived there in the early days. My father lived here for a while after the war, but he was glad to get back to Tippecanoe. My mother still lives there. I went to Tippecanoe College, and now here I am; and so you have the story of my life! Perhaps I shall go back, too, just as my father did,—if I can't find the moose!"

"I have heard that the country about Tippecanoe is very pretty."

"Yes; I like the town. My father and your uncle went to the college, and I followed them, all unworthily. I go back very often,—it is really home, you know, my mother being there."

"I hardly know what life in a town of that sort may be like. I suppose everything takes its color from the college."

"Yes, in a great measure. Tippecanoe is a little old-

fashioned and quaint. I always felt that my father missed an opportunity sometime in his life, but I never knew when or how; and I have no right to think so."

Ezra Dameron, with the old Bible on his knees, raised his eyes and stared into the fire as these words caught and held his attention. He remembered Morris Leighton's father very well, and he smiled grimly as he watched the hickory logs burning and reconstructed for himself certain pages of his own life. There had been a man that Margaret Merriam had loved, and would have married, if her pride had not betrayed her into an estrangement; but it was her pride that had given her into his own hands. He heard the son of Morris Leighton talking to his daughter,—to Margaret Dameron's daughter,—and the fact gave him a certain pleasure. He continued to stare into the fire, with the old leather-bound Bible open on his lean knees. The girl was his own and she should not be given to Morris Leighton's son. He should take care of that. And he nodded to himself as he turned the leaves of his Bible.

CHAPTER XII

JACK BALCOMB'S PLEASANT WAYS

There comes a time in the life of young men when their college fraternity pins lie forgotten in the collar-button box and the spiking of freshmen ceases to be a burning issue. Tippecanoe was one of the few freshwater colleges that barred women; but this was not its only distinction, for its teaching was sound, its campus charming and the town of which it was the chief ornament a quiet place noted from the beginning of things for its cultivated people.

It is no longer so very laudable for a young man to pay his way through college; and Morris Leighton had done this easily and without caring to be praised or martyred for doing so. He had enjoyed his college days; he had been popular with town and gown; and he had managed to get his share of undergraduate fun while leading his classes. He had helped in the college library; he had twisted the iron letter-press on the president's correspondence late into the night; he had copied briefs for a lawyer after hours; but he had pitched for the nine and hustled for his "frat," and he had led class rushes with ardor and success.

He had now been for several years in the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr at Marion, only an hour's ride from Tippecanoe; and he still kept in touch with

the college. Michael Carr fully appreciated a young man who took the law seriously and who could sit down in a court room on call mornings, when need be, and turn off a demurrer without paraphrasing it from a text-book.

Mrs. Carr, too, found Morris Leighton useful, and she liked him, because he always responded unquestioningly to any summons to fill up a blank at her table; and if Mr. Carr was reluctant at the last minute to attend a lecture on "Egyptian Burial Customs," Mrs. Carr could usually summon Morris Leighton by telephone in time to act as her escort. Young men were at a premium in Mariona, as in most other places, and it was something to have one of the species, of an accommodating turn, and very presentable, within telephone range. Mrs. Carr was grateful, and so, it must be said, was her husband, who did not care to spend his evenings digging up Egyptians that had been a long time dead, or listening to comic operas. It was through Mrs. Carr that Leighton came to be well known in Mariona; she told her friends to ask him to call, and there were now many homes besides hers that he visited.

It sometimes occurred to Morris Leighton that he was not getting ahead in the world very fast. He knew that his salary from Carr was more than any other young lawyer of his years earned by independent practice; but it seemed to him that he ought to be doing better. He had not drawn on his mother's small resources since his first year at college; he had made his own way—and a little more—but he experienced moments of restlessness in which the difficulties of establishing himself in his profession loomed large and formidable.

An errand to a law firm in one of the fashionable new buildings that had lately raised the Mariona skyline led him one afternoon past the office of his college classmate, Jack Balcomb. "J. Arthur Balcomb" was the inscription on the door, "Suite B, Room 1." Leighton had seen little of Balcomb for a year or more, and his friend's name on the ground-glass door arrested his eye.

Two girls were busily employed at typewriters in the anteroom, and one of them extended a blank card to Morris and asked him for his name. The girl disappeared into the inner room and came back instantly followed by Balcomb, who seized Morris's hand, dragged him in and closed the door.

"Well, old man!" Balcomb shouted. "I'm glad to see you. It's downright pleasant to have a fellow come in occasionally and feel no temptation to take his watch. Sink into yonder soft-yielding leather and allow me to offer you one of these plutocratic perfectos. Only the elect get these, I can tell you. In that drawer there I keep a brand made out of car waste and hemp rope, that does very well for ordinary commercial sociability. Got a match? All right; smoke up and tell me what you're doing to make the world a better place to live in, as old Prexy used to say at college."

"I'm digging at the law, at the same old stand. I can't say that I'm flourishing like Jonah's gourd, as you seem to be."

Morris cast his eyes over the room, which was handsomely furnished. There was a good rug on the floor and the desk and table were of heavy oak; an engraving of Thomas Jefferson hung over Balcomb's desk, and

on the opposite side of the room was a table covered with financial reference books.

"Well, I tell you, old man," declared Balcomb, "you've got to fool all the people all the time these days to make it go. Those venerable whiskers around town whine about the good old times and how a young man's got to go slow but sure. There's nothing in it; and they wouldn't be in it either, if they had to start in again; no siree!"

"What is your game just now, Jack, if it isn't impertinent? It's hard to keep track of you. I remember very well that you started in to learn the wholesale drug business."

"Oh tush! don't refer to that, an thou lovest me! That is one of the darkest pages of my life. Those people down there in South High Street thought I was a jay, and they sent me out to help the shipping clerk. Wouldn't that jar you! Overalls,—and a hand truck. Wow! I couldn't get out of that fast enough. Then, you know, I went to Chicago and spent a year in a broker's office, and I guess I learned a few up there. Oh, rather! They sent me into the country to sell mining stock and I made a record. They kept the printing presses going overtime to keep me supplied. Say, they got afraid of me; I was too good!"

He stroked his vandyke beard complacently, and flicked the ash from his cigar.

"What's your line now? Real estate, mortgages, lending money to the poor? How do you classify yourself?"

"You do me a cruel wrong, Morris, a cruel wrong. You read my sign on the outer wall? Well, that's a

bluff. There's nothing in real estate, *per se*, as old Doc Bridges used to say at college. And the loan business has all gone to the bad,—people are too rich; farmers are rolling in real money and have it to lend. There was nothing for little Willie in petty brokerages. I'm scheming—promoting—and I take my slice off of everything that passes."

"That certainly sounds well. You've learned fast. You had an ambition to be a poet when you were in college. I think I still have a few pounds of your verses in my traps somewhere."

Balcomb threw up his head and laughed in self-pity.

"I believe I *was* bitten with the literary tarantula for a while, but I've lived it down, I hope. Prexy used to predict a bright literary future for me in those days. You remember, when I made Phi Beta Kappa, how he took both my hands and wept over me. 'Balcomb,' he says, 'you're an honor to the college.' I suppose he'd weep again, if he knew I'd only forgotten about half the letters of the Greek alphabet,—left them, as one might say, several thousand parasangs to the rear in my mad race for daily sustenance. Well, I may not leave any vestiges on the sands of time, but, please God, I shan't die hungry,—not if I keep my health. Dear old Prexy! He was a nice old chump, though a trifle somnolent in his chapel talks."

"Well, we needn't pull the planks out of the bridge we've crossed on. I got a lot out of college that I'm grateful for. They did their best for us," said Morris.

"Oh, yes; it was well enough, but if I had it to do over, Tippecanoe wouldn't see me; not much! It isn't what you learn in college, it's the friendships you make

and all that sort of thing that counts. A western man ought to go east to college and rub up against eastern fellows. The atmosphere at the freshwater colleges is pretty jay. Fred Waters left Tippecanoe and went to Yale and got in with a lot of influential fellows down there,—chaps whose fathers are in big things in New York. Fred has a fine position now, just through his college pull, and first thing you know, he'll pick up an heiress and be fixed for life. Fred's a winner all right."

"He's also an ass," said Leighton. "I remember him of old."

"An ass of the large gray and long-eared species,—I'll grant you that, all right enough; but look here, old man, you've got to overlook the fact that a fellow occasionally lifts his voice and brays. Man does not live by the spirit alone; he needs bread, and bread's getting hard to get."

"I've noticed it," replied Leighton, who had covered all this ground before in talks with Balcomb and did not care to go into it further.

"And then, you remember," Balcomb went on, in enjoyment of his own reminiscences, "I wooed the law for a while. But I guess what I learned wouldn't have embarrassed Chancellor Kent. I really had a client once. I didn't see a chance of getting one any other way, so I hired him. He was a coon. I employed him for two dollars to go to the Grand Opera House and buy a seat in the orchestra when Sir Henry Irving was giving *The Merchant of Venice*. He went to sleep and snored and they threw him out with rude, insolent, and angry hands after the second act; and I brought suit against the management for damages, basing my claim

on the idea that they had spurned my dusky brother on account of his race, color and previous condition of servitude. The last clause was a joke. He had never done any work in his life, except for the state. He was a very sightly coon, too, now that I recall him. The show was, as I said, *The Merchant of Venice*, and I'll leave it to anybody if my client wasn't at least as pleasing to the eye as Sir Henry in his Shylock togs. I suppose if it had been *Othello*, race feeling would have run so high that Sir Henry would hardly have escaped lynching. Well, to return. My client got loaded on gin about the time the case came up on demurrer and gave the snap away, and I dropped out of the practice to avoid being disbarred. And it was just as well. My landlord had protested against my using the office at night for poker purposes, so I passed up the law and sought the asphodel fields of promotion. *Les affaires font l'homme*, as old Professor Garneau used to say at college. So here I am; and I'm glad I shook the law. I'd got tired of eating coffee and rolls at the Berlin bakery three times a day.

"Why, Morris, old man," he went on volubly, "there were days when the loneliness in my office grew positively oppressive. You may remember that room I had in the old Adams and Harper Block? It gave upon a courtyard where the rats from a livery stable came to disport themselves on rainy days. I grew to be a dead shot with the flobert rifle; but lawsy, there's mighty little consideration for true merit in this world! Just because I winged a couple of cheap hack horses one day, when my nerves weren't steady, the livery people made me stop, and one of my fellow tenants in the old

rookery threatened to have me arrested for conducting a shooting gallery without a license. He was a dentist, and he said the snap of the rifle worried his victims."

The two typewriting machines outside clicked steadily. Some one knocked at the door.

"Come in!" shouted Balcomb.

One of the typewriter operators entered with a brisk air of business and handed a telegram to Balcomb, who tore it open nonchalantly. As he read it, he tossed the crumpled envelope over his shoulder in an absent-minded way.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, slapping his leg as though the news were important. Then, to the girl, who waited with note-book and pencil in hand: "Never mind; don't wait. I'll dictate the answer later."

"How did it work?" he asked, turning to Leighton, who had been looking over the books on the table.

"How did what work?"

"The fake. It was a fake telegram. That girl's trained to bring in a message every time I have a caller. If the caller stays thirty minutes, it's two messages,—in other words I'm on a fifteen-minute schedule. I tip a boy in the telegraph office to keep me supplied with blanks. It's a great scheme. There's nothing like a telegram to create the impression that your office is a seething caldron of business. Old Prexy was in town the other day. I don't suppose he ever got a dose of electricity in his life unless he had been sorely bereft of a member of his family and was summoned to the funeral baked meats. Say, he must have thought I had a private wire!"

Leighton sat down and fanned himself with his hat.

"You'll be my death yet. You have the cheek of a nice, fresh, new baggage-check, Balcomb."

"Your cigar isn't burning well, Morris. Won't you try another? No? I like my guests to be comfortable."

"I'm comfortable enough. I'm even entertained. Go ahead and let me see the rest of the show."

"Oh, we haven't exactly a course of stunts here. Those are nice girls out there. I've broken them of the chewing-gum habit, and they can answer anxious inquiries at the door now without danger of strangulation."

"They seem speedy on the machine. Your correspondence must be something vast!"

"Um, yes. It has to be. Every cheap skate of a real estate man keeps one stenographer. My distinction is that I keep two. They're easy advertising. Now that little one in the pink shirt-waist that brought in the message from Mars a moment ago is a wonder of intelligence. Do you know what she's doing now?"

"Trying to break the machine I should guess, from the racket."

"Bah! It's the Lord's Prayer."

"You mean it's a sort of prayer machine."

"Not on your life. Maude hasn't any real work to do just now and she's running off the Lord's Prayer. I know by the way it clicks. When she strikes 'our daily bread' the machine always gives a little gasp. See? The rule of the office is that they must have some diddings doing all the time. The big one with red hair is a perfect marvel at the Declaration of Independence. She'll be through addressing circulars in a little while and will run off into 'All men are created

equal'—a blooming lie, by the way—without losing a stroke."

"You *have* passed the poetry stage, beyond a doubt. But I should think the strain of keeping all this going would be wearing on your sensitive poetical nature. And it must cost something."

"Oh, yes!" Balcomb pursed his lips and stroked his fine soft beard. "But it's worth it. I'm not playing for small stakes. I'm looking for Christmas trees. Now they've got their eyes on me. These old Elijahs that have been the bone and sinew of the town for so long that they think they own it, are about done for. You can't sit in a bank here any more and look solemn and turn people down because your corn hurts or because the chinch-bugs have got into the wheat in Dakota or the czar has bought the heir apparent a new toy pistol. You've got to present a smiling countenance to the world and give the glad hand to everybody you're likely to need in your business. I jolly everybody!"

"That comes easy for you; but I didn't know you could make an asset of it."

"It's part of my working capital. Now you'd better cut loose from old man Carr and move up here and get a suite near me. I've got more than I can do,—I'm always needing a lawyer,—organizing companies, legality of bonds, and so on. Dignified work. Lots of out-of-town people come here and I'll put you in touch with them. I threw a good thing to Van Cleve only the other day. Bond foreclosure suit for some fellows in the East that I sell stuff to. They wrote and asked me the name of a good man. I thought of you—old college days and all that—but Van Cleve had just done me a good turn

and I had to let him have it. But you'd better come over. You'll never know the world's in motion in that musty old hole of Carr's. You get timid and afraid to go near the water by staying on shore so long. But say, Morris, you seem to be getting along pretty well in the social push. Your name looks well in the society column. How do you work it, anyhow?"

"Don't expect me to give the snap away. The secret's valuable. And I'm not really inside; I am only peering through the pickets!"

"Tush! Get thee hence! I saw you in a box at the theater the other night,—evidently Mrs. Carr's party. There's nothing like mixing business with pleasure. Ah me!"

He yawned and stroked his beard and laughed, with a fine showing of white teeth.

"I don't see what's pricking you with small pins of envy. You were there with about the gayest crowd I ever saw at a theater; and it looked like your own party."

"Don't say a word," implored Balcomb, putting out his hand. "Members of the board of managers of the state penitentiary, their wives, their cousins and their aunts. Say, weren't those beauteous whiskers! My eye! Well, the evening netted me about five hundred plunks, and I got to see the show and to eat a good supper in the bargain. Some reformers were to appear before them that night officially, and my friends wanted to keep them busy. I was called into the game to do something,—hence these tears. Lawsy! I earned my money. Did you see those women?—about two million per cent. pure jay!"

"You ought to cut out that sort of thing; it isn't nice."

"Oh, you needn't be so virtuous. Carr keeps a whole corps of rascals to spread apple-butter on the legislature corn-bread."

"You'd better speak to him about it. He'd probably tell Mrs. Carr to ask you to dinner right away."

"Oh, that will come in time. I don't expect to do everything at once. You may see me up there sometime; and when you do, don't shy off like a colt at the choos-choos. By the way, I'd like to be one of the bright particular stars of the Dramatic Club if you can fix it. You remember that amateur theatricals are rather in my line."

"I do. At college you were one of the most persistent Thespians we had, and one of the worst. But let social matters go. You haven't told me how to get rich quick yet. I haven't had the nerve to chuck the law as you have."

"Well," continued Balcomb, expansively, "a fellow has got to take what he can when he can. One swallow doesn't make a summer; one sucker doesn't make a spring; so we must catch the birdling *en route* or *en passant*, as our dear professor of modern languages used to try to get us to remark. Say, between us old college friends, I cleared up a couple of thousand last week just too easy for any use. You know Singerly, the popular undertaker,—Egyptian secret of embalming, lady and gentleman attendants, night and day,—always wears a spray of immortelles in his lapel and a dash of tuberosé essence on his handkerchief. Well, Singerly and I operated together in the smoothest way you ever saw. Excuse me!" He lay back and howled. "Well, there was

an old house up here on High Street just where it begins to get good; very exclusive—old families and all that. It belonged to an estate, and I got an option on it just for fun. I began taking Singerly up there to look at it. We'd measure it, and step it off, and stop and palaver on the sidewalk. In a day or two those people up there began to take notice and to do me the honor to call on me. You see, my boy, an undertaking shop—even a fashionable one—for a neighbor, isn't pleasant; it wouldn't add, as one might say, to the *sauce piquante* of life; and as a reminder of our mortality—a trifle depressing, as you will admit."

He took the cigar from his mouth and examined the burning end of it thoughtfully.

"I sold the option to one of Singerly's prospective neighbors for the matter of eleven hundred. He's a retired wholesale grocer and didn't need the money."

"Seems to me you're cutting pretty near the dead-line, Jack. That's not a pretty sort of hold-up. You might as well take a sandbag and lie in wait by night."

"Great rhubarb! You make me tired. I'm not robbing the widow and the orphan, but a fat old Dutchman who doesn't ask anything of life but his sauerkraut and beer."

"And you do! You'd better give your ethical sense a good tonic before you butt into the penal code."

"Come off! I've got a better scheme even than the Singerly deal. The school board's trying to locate a few schools in up-town districts. Very undesirable neighbors. I rather think I can make a couple of turns there. This is all strictly *inter nos*, as Professor Morton used to say

in giving me, as a special mark of esteem, a couple of hundred extra lines of Virgil to keep me in o' nights."

He looked at his watch and gave the stem-key a few turns before returning it to his pocket.

"You'll have to excuse me, old man. I've got a date with Adams, over at the Central States Trust Company. He's a right decent chap when you know how to handle him. I want to get them to finance a big apartment house scheme. I've got an idea for a flat that will make the town sit up and gasp."

"Don't linger on my account, Jack. I only stopped in to see whether you kept your good spirits. I feel as though I'd had a shower bath. Come along."

Several men were waiting to see Balcomb in the outer office and he shook hands with all of them and begged them to come again, taking care to mention that he had been called to the Central States Trust Company and had to hurry away.

He called peremptorily to the passing elevator-car to wait, and as he and Leighton squeezed into it, he continued his half of an imaginary conversation in a tone that was audible to every passenger.

"I could have had those bonds, if I had wanted them; but I knew there was a cloud on them—the county was already over its legal limit. I guess those St. Louis fellows will be sorry they were so enterprising—here we are!"

And then in a lower tone to Leighton: "That was for old man Dameron's benefit. Did you see him jammed back in the corner of the car? Queer old party and as tight as a drum. When I can work off some assessable

and non-interest bearing bonds on him, it'll be easy to sell Uncle Sam's Treasury a gold brick. They say the old man has a daughter who is finer than gold; yea, than much fine gold. I'm going to look her up, if I ever get time. You'd better come over soon and pick out an office. *Verbum sat sapienti*, as our loving teacher used to say. So long!"

Leighton walked back to his office in good humor and better contented with his own lot.

CHAPTER XIII

A REHEARSAL OF "DECEIVERS EVER"

"Well, I butted in all right," said Balcomb, cheerfully. "I suppose you're saying to yourself that it's another case of the unfailing Balcomb cheek. Welladay! as Prexy used to say in the good old summer-time of our college days. The good Lord has to give everybody something, and if he gave me an asbestos-lined, Bessemer-covered outside to my face, it's not my fault."

"You're a peach, Jack, and no mistake, as I've said before. I wish I had your nerve,—"

"But say, they just *had* to have me in this show! It proves how every little thing helps as we toil onward and upward. You know I was tenor on the glee club at college, and you'll remember that when we came over to town and gave that concert for the benefit of the athletic fund I was a winner, all right. Well, I'm going to throw my whole immortal soul into this thing,—"

"You'll leave an aching void if you do."

"Thanks, kindly. As I was saying, I'm going to do myself and Mrs. Carr proud. She's one of the grandest women we ever had in this state. Most of these women that preside at meetings are N. G. They haven't any sense of humor. But Mrs. Carr knows that all this woman's suffrage business is so much Thomas Rot. She works her sisters just for fun, and they never catch on

a little bit. She just has to be president of things, and she's an ornament to the community, by gum."

Leighton thanked his stars that Mrs. Carr had discovered her tenor without his help. He and Balcomb were standing in the Carr library, where the last undress rehearsal of *Deceivers Ever* was about to begin. Leighton, who was stage manager, also sang in the chorus, which appeared in one act as foresters and in the other as soldiers. Mrs. Carr always had a reason for everything she did. Her reason for insisting that the Dramatic Club, of which she was the president, should give a comic opera was thoroughly adequate, for at this time she was exploiting a young musician who had lately appeared in Mariona, and who was not, let it be remembered, a mere instructor in vocal music, but a composer as well. He was a very agreeable young man, who wished to build up a permanent orchestra in Mariona, and Mrs. Carr was backing this project with her accustomed enthusiasm. Nothing could help matters forward so well as a social success for Max Schmidt. He had written an opera, which many managers had declined for the reason that the music was too good and the book too bad.

Deceivers Ever was the name of the work, and Mrs. Carr was preparing to produce an abridged version of it on the night before Thanksgiving. The scene was set in Germany, and there were six men—the gay deceivers—all of them officers in the army. The chief girl character was the daughter of a new commandant of a post, but at a ball given in his honor she changed places with her maid, and no end of confusion resulted. Mrs. Carr had urged Zelda to take the principal rôle, and

Zelda had consented, with the understanding that Olive Merriam was to be elected a member of the club and given a part in the opera. Zelda saw only perfection in Olive; she declared that Olive's voice was far superior to her own; and so Olive, who had never moved in the larger currents of Mariona social life, found herself unexpectedly enrolled in the Dramatic Club and a member of the cast of *Deceivers Ever*.

While Leighton and Balcomb stood talking in the library, Herr Schmidt, in the drawing-room, lectured the rest of the company in his difficult English. He now fell upon the piano with a crash and nodded to Zelda, who began one of her solos. When this had been sung to his satisfaction, the director called for Olive and Captain Pollock.

Pollock was greatly liked by the people he had begun to know in Mariona. The men about the Tippecanoe Club had the reputation of scrutinizing new-comers a little superciliously, in the way of old members of a small club, who resent the appearance of strangers at the lounging-room fireside. But Pollock fitted into places as though he had always been used to them. He told a good story or he sang a song well, when called on to do something at the grill-room Saturday nights. Mrs. Carr had given him one of the best parts in the opera.

The young officer and Olive carried off with great animation a dialogue in song into which Herr Schmidt had been able to get some real humor.

"You haven't told me how much you like my cousin," said Zelda to Leighton, when he sat down by her in an interval of parley between the director and Mrs. Carr. "I expect something nice."

"Nothing could be easier. She's a great hit! She's a discovery! She's an ornament to society!"

"Humph! That sounds like sample sentences from a copy-book. A man with a reputation as an orator to sustain ought to be able to do better than that."

"Not having such a reputation—"

"Not even thinking one has—"

"Oh, I'm conceited, am I?"

"I hadn't thought of it before, but no doubt it's true," said Zelda, looking across the room to where Jack Balcomb was talking with his usual vivacity to a girl in the chorus whom he had never met before. He was perfectly at ease, as though leaning against grand pianos in handsome drawing-rooms and talking to pretty girls had always been his mission in life.

Morris did not follow Zelda's eyes; he was watching her face gravely. He had tried in many ways to please her, but she maintained an attitude toward him that was annoying, to say the least.

"There's Mr. Balcomb over there," Zelda remarked casually. "He sings divinely, doesn't he? Don't you think he sings divinely?" and she looked at Morris suddenly, with a provoking air of gravity.

"I'm sure he was a De Reszke in some former incarnation," said Morris, savagely.

"That was just what I was thinking, only I hadn't the words to express it," said Zelda, with a mockery of joy at finding they were in accord.

"I'm glad, then, that we can agree about something, even when we're both undoubtedly wrong."

"I don't like to think that I can be wrong," said Zelda. "And it isn't in the least flattering for you to suggest

such a thing. I shall have to speak to my Uncle Rodney about you."

"Any interest you may take in me will be appreciated. I had not hoped that you would—"

"Would what?" she asked, when he hesitated.

"I've forgotten now what we were talking about."

"That is really most flattering! Oh, Mr. Balcomb."

Jack had crossed the room, giving what he called the cheering jolly to several young women on the way, and he turned quickly:

"At your service, Miss Dameron,"—and he bowed impressively.

"Mr. Leighton is crazy about your singing. He is just waiting for a chance to congratulate you. But he's very unhappy to-night. Words fail him." And she shook her head and looked into Balcomb's grinning face as though this were a great grief between them.

"What kind of a jolly is this? I say, Morris, you look like first and second grave-digger done into one. We're not playing *Hamlet* now. But I can tell you, Miss Dameron, that when Brother Leighton—he belongs to my frat, hence the brother—did Hamlet over at our dear old alma mater, the gloom that settled down on that township could have been cut up into badges of mourning enough to have supplied Spain through her little affair with these states. That's Walt Whitman,—‘these states.’ Do you know, I was Ophelia to his Hamlet, and if I do say it myself, I was a sweet thing in Ophelias."

"I don't doubt you were, Mr. Balcomb," said Zelda.

"There was just one thing lacking in your impersonation," declared Leighton: "you ought to have been

drowned in the first scene of the first act to have made it perfect."

"No violence, gentlemen, I beg of you!" And Zelda hurried across the room to where Herr Schmidt was assembling the principals.

"Say, that girl has got the art of stringing down fine. She seems to have you going all right. You look like twenty-nine cents at a thirty-cent bargain counter. But you take it too hard. I wish she'd string me! They're never so much interested as when they throw you on your face and give you the merry tra la. I tell you I've had experience with the sect all right, and I know!"

"Yes, I remember your flirtations with the girls that waited on table at the college boarding-house. You had a very cheering way with them."

Balcomb's eyes were running restlessly over the groups of young people. He was appraising and fixing them in his mind as he talked. His joy in being among them,—these representative young people of the city, whose names he knew well from long and diligent perusal of the personal and society column of the daily papers,—amused Leighton; but the fellow's self-satisfaction irritated him, too.

"What? Yes!" and Balcomb turned to him again. "I wouldn't have you think for a minute that the past's blood-rusted key has any horrors for me. I'll bet you I did raise the high perpendicular hand to those poor orphans as they passed the pickled pigs' feet and the stewed rhubarb at Mrs. Fassett's boarding-house. And I'm glad I did. My office in the world is to make two cheerful jays where none has been before. Say, that

little Merriam girl is a most delicious peach, isn't she? Miss Dameron's cousin or something of the kind. About as much alike as the Queen of Sheba and Come into the Garden Maud! I'm going to play up to that little girl; but say, I don't care for that strutting little captain. I've got to cut him out. These West Pointers always did make me tired. Think the earth is theirs and the fullness thereof; and I'm unalterably opposed to militarism, social and political."

Morris said nothing, and Balcomb went on, in his usual breathless fashion:

"I must cultivate Mrs. Carr. She's certainly a good thing. I really think she rates me above par owing to a strong position I took with her a few evenings ago *ad interim*, so to speak, while Dutchy Schmidt got mad and talked through his hair. The strong position, as I was saying, was apropos of Ibsen. When I remarked, quite casually, that Ibsen was the great soul photographer, you should have seen her eyes light up! I have visions of being much seen in these parlors hereafter. I guess Mike, the hubbyhub, isn't so much on soul himself, but she has him hypnotized, all right. Just look at that sawed-off Pollock playing up to my girl! The infinitesimal projectile of dynastic imperialism! I see his finish. Ah! Watch me lift my velvety tenor."

Herr Schmidt whirled on the piano stool and glared in Balcomb's direction through his shaggy mane; and the young promoter sprang into the middle of the floor and began acting and singing with the utmost *sang-froid*. He was easily the best man in the company, and Mrs. Carr was delighted with the spirit that he brought to rehearsals.

The chorus had been drilled apart, and this was the first time Morris had heard the principals sing. He had joined the chorus under protest, but Mrs. Carr had insisted, and when he learned that Zelda was to be the star it had not been difficult to comply. She began now one of her songs, as Gretchen, the commandant's daughter:

"O deep dark woods of fatherland,
 Thy boughs stretch high above;
 O whispering wind in woodlands deep,
 Thy voice is all of love."

Until to-night, he had not heard her sing since the evening of Rodney Merriam's lobster, and he felt again the thrill that her voice had awakened in him then. She stood within the circle that the others of the company made for her, and he fancied that a great distance lay between her and every other human thing. When a contralto voice is pure and true, it is one of the surest vehicles of passion there is in the world. It has a gathering power that seems to sweep all before it; it touches the heights but never lets go of the depths; it becomes, when it rises greatly, something that is not of this world and that yet speaks of every joy and every grief that the world has known. It was a song of farewell,—the song of a girl singing to her lover who was going away to war; and it seemed to Morris Leighton that it was a good-by to everything that a girl might know and hold good.

When the last notes died away, Balcomb stepped out at the director's nod and began the answering song. Balcomb usually amused Morris; but the fellow struck

upon him discordantly now. Zelda was laughing at Balcomb's antics as he began to sing with fervor and a real sense of the dramatic requirements. As he neared the end, where Zelda and he sang together the duet that ended the first half of the opera, Zelda put up her hands, and he took them, gazing into her eyes with a fine lover-like air. Their voices soared into the climax without a break, while the director threw himself into strange contortions as he struck the last bars leading to the high note which they gained and held perfectly.

The dress rehearsal was fixed for the next night.

"It simply can't fail!" declared Mrs. Carr to Leighton. "Miss Dameron could carry it alone if every one else should break down."

"That is altogether true," said Morris. He was glaring at Balcomb, whose joy in being a member of the cast was hard to bear.

Copeland, the lawyer who never practised, joined Leighton and twitted him for appearing so gloomy. Copeland and his wife were on the committee that had *Deceivers Ever* in charge.

"I'll give you anything I own, if you will tell me how I came to be on this committee," said Copeland.

"It wouldn't be right to take the money. It's too easy. You're in because Mrs. Carr asked you to be in," replied Morris.

"Yes; and that damned Ogden boy has got typhoid fever, and I'm going to sing the raging father's part. I'm an awful ass, Leighton. If there's a larger or more industrious, hard-working ass anywhere than I am—" At this point Jack Balcomb made himself conspicuous by laughing out in a harsh discordant tone at some-

thing Herr Schmidt had said. "I take it all back," said Copeland, sadly. "I'll admit myself,—regretfully, but still I'll admit,—that J. Arthur Balcomb can give me a big handicap and still beat me. At the risk of appearing unduly humble I'll say that I never started in his class."

CHAPTER XIV

AN ATTACK OF SORE THROAT

On the morning of the day set for the Dramatic Club's most ambitious entertainment, Zelda Dameron lay in bed with blankets piled high about her and a piece of red flannel wrapped ostentatiously around her throat. For the first time since she came home she had failed to appear at the breakfast-table, and Polly climbed to her room and surveyed her critically.

"I'm afraid it's diphtheria," said Zelda, hoarsely, putting her hand to the red flannel. "You must telephone to Mrs. Carr right away that I wish to see her immediately. And when she comes bring her right up here."

"Yes, Miss Zee," said the black woman, turning away in alarm.

"And Polly,"—Zelda's face convulsed with pain and she sat up in bed and coughed violently,—“don't alarm father. Tell him I'm not very sick. And Polly—when Mrs. Carr comes don't let her fall and break her neck on the stairs. Pull down all the shades and light those candles on the dressing-table.”

She lay back, gathering the collar of a pink bath-robe about her throat.

"Don't I look awfully sick, Polly? It would be dreadful to die, and me so young. And, Polly,"—she waited

for a moment as though in deep thought—"Polly,"—her voice rang out clear, and she waved a hand to the colored woman,—“you may go and telephone Mrs. Carr and then bring me,”—she assumed her hoarse whisper again,—“bring me a cup of coffee, a plate of toast and a jar of marmalade. A doctor, say you, Polly Apollo? Not if I know myself!”—and she hummed in a perfectly natural voice:

“Myself when young did eagerly frequent
 Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
 About it and about: but evermore
 Came out by the same door where in I went.”

In an hour Mrs. Carr's station wagon was at the door of the Dameron house. The president of the Dramatic Club heard Polly's solemn whisper that “Miss Zee was ‘pow’ful sick’” and she ran up the dark narrow stairway with a speed that brought her in undignified breathlessness to Zelda's room, where the star of the Dramatic Club cast lay coughing. The odor of camphor filled the room, which was not surprising, as Zelda had soaked her handkerchief from a bottle of spirits of camphor only a few moments before and swung it in the air the better to distribute its aroma.

“My dear child, what on earth does this mean?”—and Mrs. Carr rushed upon the bed and peered down on the invalid.

“My throat; it's perfectly terrible! I must have taken cold at the rehearsal last night.” Zelda sat up in bed, looking very miserable and speaking with difficulty, while she pointed vaguely to a chair.

"This is a calamity,—it's a positive tragedy."

"I'm sorry. I'm ever so ashamed of myself. My throat feels like a nutmeg grater."

"Ugh!" and Mrs. Carr shuddered. "What does the doctor say?"

"Doctor? I wouldn't have one of them come near me for anything. I had an attack like this once before—in Paris—and I know exactly what to do. I have always kept the prescription the French doctor gave me."

"But what can we do? You've simply got to go through the play to-night, some way."

"I hope so, I hope so," said Zelda, in a tone that was without hope.

"Even if you can't sing, you'll have to speak the lines. It's too late now for a postponement."

"Yes; if my fever goes down, I can speak the lines somehow. I'm afraid there's fever with the cold."

"Then you must see the doctor. You must not trifle with yourself."

"No, no: I beg of you, no! I don't know any doctor here and a stranger would only be a nuisance. I'll be better. I don't like being a trouble; and I'll come anyhow, dead or alive."

"That's the right spirit; you've simply got to appear. We'd never hear the last of it if we failed."

"Yes, I know. Would you mind drawing that shade a trifle lower? That's better."

Zelda opened her eyes wide and stared about her dejectedly.

"I'll tell you what I might do. Something's just occurred to me. You know Christine's part is much lighter than Gretchen's. If Olive would consent to trade with



Mrs. Carr

W. H. L. L.

me,—” She broke into a fit of violent coughing. “My! I wish my chest didn’t hurt so. What was I saying? Oh, yes! about that other part,—if Olive would exchange with me, I think I might carry Christine’s part through. She can sing Gretchen as well as I can—”

“Certainly not; it’s impossible. And hers is a soprano part, anyhow.”

“Oh, that’s easy,”—another fit of coughing—“the range is not so very different. That won’t be any trouble.”

“It would take days to do it!” said Mrs. Carr, with a groan.

Zelda lay back on the pillows and pressed the camphor-soaked handkerchief to her nose.

“That’s the only way out of it that I see. If Olive will trade with me, I think I can go ahead; but I can’t do the work of my own part. Gretchen is on the stage all the time. You’d better telephone Professor Schmidt at once. He can have a rehearsal with Olive; but you’d better go to see her. She’s at home to-day,—the Thanksgiving vacation has begun. If she’ll do it—and you tell her she must—I’ll try to take her part.”

“But it can’t be done,—so suddenly,—the change will throw all the rest out.”

Mrs. Carr threw up her hands helplessly.

“Please don’t make me feel any worse,” begged Zelda, piteously. “I’m ever so sorry on your account. And I’ll do the best I can,—honestly I will. And do find Olive and tell her to come over and see me. Tell her to bring her Christine dresses with her. We’ll have to trade costumes and make them suit.”

Mrs. Carr rose as one who will not bow to circumstances.

"For heaven's sake, don't fail me! I shall be utterly ruined if we don't make this go some way."

"I know,—I know,—I shall certainly be on hand, if they have to bring me in a box,"—and Zelda sighed and coughed again as though her dissolution were imminent.

Mrs. Carr brought Olive back and dropped her at the Dameron door with solemn injunctions to be sure that Zelda was produced at the Athenæum at seven o'clock; then she went with her troubles to Professor Schmidt.

Olive appeared at Zelda's door bearing a suit-case in her hand. A groan greeted her, as she paused in the doorway, blinking in the dim light of the room.

"Oh, Zee!"

Another moan, followed by a racking cough, and Zelda's arms beat the covers as though in an agony of pain.

"Olive, have you come? I thought you would never get here!" and Zelda moaned. "Here I am all alone in the house and nobody to do anything for me. I didn't think you would treat me that way,—and your own flesh and blood, too."

Olive dropped the suit-case and drew near the bed.

"I'm burning with fever," moaned Zelda. "It's typhoid pneumonia, I'm sure. I read of it in the papers. Maybe it's contagious. Most likely they will put a red sign on the front door so no one can get in."

She extended her hand to Olive, who took it solicitously.

"You poor dear! When did you first feel it coming on?"

"Oh, I haven't been well for several days, but I tried to bear up. I'm so miserable I don't know what to do."

"Mrs. Carr didn't think you were so sick. She said you wouldn't have a doctor."

"No, I'm afraid of them. Hand me that bottle—can you find it?—on the table there. I can't bear to face the light. That's it, I think. Yes, that will do, thank you. Please look at those candles. I'm sure they're dripping all over everything."

She took the bottle which Olive handed her, clutching it nervously as though her hope of life lay in it.

Olive had thrown off her coat and hat.

"Sit down, Olive, will you? If you are cold you'd better stand over the register. I'm simply burning up myself." Zelda succumbed to a fit of coughing. "Have you the music, and the Christine dress? I hate awfully to disappoint Mrs. Carr, and I told her I thought I might carry your part. It isn't so heavy as Gretchen's. She's going to arrange with Herr Schmidt. You'll have to sing my part. It will do just as well for a soprano. The soprano is always the star, anyhow. You know that as well as I do," she added petulantly, as though the subject were one of long contention between them.

"It's horrible. It's perfectly ghastly," declared Olive. "I can't sing it. I can't sing, anyhow; and this whole show rests on you. You simply must sing your part! About all I had hoped to do was to skip around and do the light fantastic soubrette business like a little goose. To think of my attempting to sing Gretchen,—"

Olive spoke with a fierce animation as the enormity of the proposed change slowly dawned upon her.

"You can do it as well as I can—better! I'd be a per-

fect wooden Indian as Gretchen. I have almost as much animation as an iron hitching post. It's either that or I won't appear at all, and they can go to the North Pole for all me. I'm merely proposing the change as a favor to Mrs. Carr. Your liking it doesn't matter. You've *got* to like it."

"But the words,—I might hum the airs,—but I don't know the words of your part."

"Nor I yours; but they will come to you. You'll have a chance to rehearse the part. My sewing things are on the table. We'll fix up the duds first. About three inches off my first act skirt and a little out of the back and you'll have it. Do you see the sewing basket anywhere?"

"The whole idea is preposterous. My things can't be made to fit you," said Olive, opening the suit-case.

"We needn't fix those things of yours for me after all," declared Zelda, suddenly. "I bought a Tyrolese peasant costume once on a time, and here's my chance to use it. It's the ideal thing for Christine."

"But Zee—" began Olive.

"Please don't make me talk. It's unkind. I'll need all my strength for to-night,"—and Zelda lay back and watched her cousin with languid interest. Olive kept up a fire of protest as she set herself to the task of changing the Gretchen costume. She had been taken aback by the suddenness of Zelda's attack and the necessity for prompt action.

Olive looked up suddenly, holding Gretchen's gown in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other.

"This is all absurd, Zee Dameron. You can't put me

off as you did Mrs. Carr. I'm going to telephone for the doctor at once."

"No, no, no! I tell you I have plenty of medicine. I'll not let a doctor cross the threshold."

She held up the bottle that Olive had handed her.

"It's a French doctor's prescription for just this trouble. It's fine. I've taken quarts of it."

Olive went to the bed, snatched the bottle and held it to her nose.

"Violet water! A French medicine! You fraud, you awful, shameless fraud!"

"Please don't abuse me! My chest, oh-h-h!"

"Zelda Dameron, you are no more sick than I am! No person could get as sick as you are pretending to be in a few hours. You were as well as anybody at midnight, and you went through the rehearsal splendidly. Don't try any tricks on me—"

Zelda sat up again and folded her arms. A smile twitched the corners of her mouth; then she began to speak and fell into another fit of coughing, burying her face in the blankets and seeming unable to recover herself.

"Oh-h-h! it has got me again!" and she shook first with the vigor of her cough and then with laughter. Olive seized her and forced her back on the pillows.

"I'm going away! I'm going home! I don't intend to have you make a guy of me in such a way as this." Olive seemed about to cry, and Zelda laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I must say that your hilarity is decidedly unbecoming," said Olive, with dignity. "Mrs. Carr may forgive you, but I never shall,—never!"

Zelda's mirth rose again at the mention of Mrs. Carr.

"Theodosia would certainly be consumed with rage. Oh, me!"

She sat up in bed and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Please get me a handkerchief from that bureau,—top drawer on your right. This thing smells vilely of camphor. And please don't take your doll rags and go home. I'm going to be good. Honestly; I'll be all right in a minute."

Olive did as Zelda bade her, and returned to the bedside of the invalid with unrelenting condemnation.

"Please don't look at me that way, Olive. I didn't mean to laugh; but it *is* funny. And when you look so hurt and dignified I can't help it. But we've traded parts, anyhow. Don't say a word. I have reasons,—of state, as they say in romantic drama,—and nothing can alter my determination. It's either change parts or I won't go at all. We've had that thing pounded into us for a month—it seems years to me—and every word of Max Schmidt's opera is beaten into the brains of every one of us. I believe I could sing the tenor's part; and you could, too. There are only two or three of Gretchen's songs that you need go over at all,—"

"But I won't! I won't lend myself to any such thing—"

"Olive, how dare you say won't to me! *I'm* saying it; and two people can't *won't* at the same time. My reasons are sound; my decision is final! I haven't soaked myself with camphor here in the dark for nothing. I mean business. So don't ask me any questions."

"But think of the chagrin of the rest of the cast! Don't you know this whole thing is built around *you*?

The idea of me, little old me, trying to sing a part that people expect to hear you in."

"Cousin Olive, I'm deeper than I look. I have particular reasons, most particular, for making this change. Please be a good girl and help me. If you knew, if you only knew,—"

"I'm sure there's fraud in it somewhere. But—"

"But you'll do exactly what I tell you, like a nice little girl, to please your loving cousin."

"I'm afraid so," said Olive, reluctantly. Zelda smoothed back her hair from her forehead and threw the long black braid over her shoulder.

"And now will you kindly—I'm treating you as though you were a maid-of-all-work—will you be kind and forgiving enough to throw me that other bath-wrapper from the closet—it's a queer-looking pink thing—this one is smothering me—and I'll be obliged to you. Then we can go to work."

Zelda brushed her hair at the dressing-table, breaking out occasionally into a fit of laughing. She rose suddenly in the majesty of the bath-wrapper and sang one of Christine's songs with animation, waving her hair-brush in the air:

"Again, O love, through peaceful hills
To lift the song.
Again the willing labor sweet,
The toil, the rest;
Once more, O love, we turn with hopeful hearts
To home and rest!"

"Fräulein"—she broke off abruptly in an imitation of Professor Schmidt's voice and manner—"Fräulein, dot

ist most luffly. Only ven you say 'Vonce more, O luff,' you should droop your eyes, Fräulein, shoost like dot!"

Olive watched her cousin wonderingly.

"Zee Dameron," she said gravely, "I sometimes wonder whether you are not acting all the time."

"Please don't, please don't say that." And there was a sad note in Zelda's voice. "But now let us go down and run over these charming classics of Herr Schmidt's on the piano. We can shift his characters, if he can't!"

CHAPTER XV

J. ARTHUR BALCOMB RETREATS

The Providence that protects children and drunkards also extends a saving hand to amateur theatricals. *Deceivers Ever* was presented, with no more delays and slips than usually befall amateur performances, before an audience that tested the capacity of the Athenæum. It was a great occasion for Mrs. Carr, as she had undoubtedly taken the Dramatic Club when its life was ebbing fast and made a living thing of it. She sat in the wings holding the prompt-book and prepared for any fate; and it must be confessed that in her heart she held anything but Christian feelings toward Zelda Dameron.

The change in the cast had excited much comment both in the audience and on the stage. Zelda appeared behind the scenes with divers bottles and a convincing air of invalidism, but she coached Olive cheerfully in their dressing-room.

"I can't do it; I can't do it. I'll kill the show," declared Olive.

"Don't be foolish. You are going to make the hit of your life," said Zelda, assuringly, coughing a little. "Please don't make me talk. There's the overture now. One minute—there—now don't fall over your train. You really look the duchess,"—and Zelda gently impelled

her cousin toward the stage. The chorus was on its last note, and Professor Schmidt, very red in the face, caught Olive with his eye, and reached across the fiery arc of the footlights with his bow, to draw her forward.

The programs had been printed with the part of Gretchen assigned to Miss Dameron, and when Olive appeared and was identified with the leading rôle, the applause, that began generously, died away, and there was a flutter of paper as the audience sought to identify the singer.

Olive's voice was in no sense great, but it was good, and she rose to the occasion in a way that made Zelda happy. Zelda's green riding-habit became Olive charmingly. She was a very pretty girl and she sang her song to the foresters with the dignity of the great lady she impersonated.

Mrs. Carr sighed with relief over the prompt-book as she saw that the girl was really meeting the requirements. When Olive turned and met Balcomb, after dismissing the chorus to their work in the forest, there was a hearty hand-clapping that drowned their spoken colloquy.

Zelda, as Christine the maid, now entered, after singing off stage, and sought to induce Gretchen to return home. The greeting that had been waiting for Zelda lost nothing by delay. The audience was mystified by the change of parts, but it continued to be pleased as the girls sang their duet. Zelda sang well enough, though Mrs. Carr wondered, as she proceeded, that any one with a throat as sore as Zelda's had been could sing at all. It was clear to the director that Zelda was holding back. She could easily have drowned Olive, as he knew well

enough, but the voice of the little duchess dominated. The professor glared fiercely at Zelda and swung his bow with prodigious force as though to compel her to lift her voice, but she was utterly oblivious, and it was Olive who carried off the honors of the duet.

Balcomb made a decided hit as the hero. When Leighton, in his own capacity as high private, saluted him, he really felt a thrill of admiration for Jack. Pollock, who appeared as another of the deceivers, was unknown to many of the audience, but his singing was adequate for all purposes, and his flirtation with my lady's maid behind Olive and Balcomb, who were planning an elopement, was amusing and not overacted.

The quartet that ended the act went smoothly, and the curtain came down in the erratic and halting manner of amateur theatrical curtains, upon an unqualified success. There were calls and recalls; and when Herr Schmidt was obliged to rise in his seat of authority and make a speech, he took the opportunity to explain that, owing to a slight indisposition, Miss Dameron had not felt equal to singing the part of Gretchen, but had exchanged with Miss Merriam; and he was sure that this had been fortunate, for the audience was made to realize that the cast contained two stars not differing one from another in glory.

The second part was not less successful. Copeland, the lawyer who never practised, but who sometimes sang, shared the laurels as the haughty and outraged father, and the choral pieces went capitally.

There was, however, one slight occurrence that nobody understood—an obscure incident of the performance that mystified the cast and not a few of the au-

dience. It came in the singing of a little song written for the part of Christine, the least pretentious musically of all the lyrics in the opera. It was Zelda's last solo—a little song of the wanderer, the peasant girl, lost from her mistress, and straying alone in the forest. The words were poor, as the art of words goes, but in singing them Zelda forgot herself,—forgot that in a mood of quixotism she had deliberately chosen second place.

“I call no hearth my own,”

she began. There were three verses; and Herr Schmidt, leading her with the violin, felt that at last he was coming into his own. Leighton, standing among the chorus, knew again the exquisite pain that the girl's voice wrought in him. He knew by the tensivity of the hush that fell upon the audience that the song's appeal was not to himself alone. The professor beamed with joy as the full, deep notes rose in the hall; and he threw down his violin at the end and joined in the applause. And as the hand-clapping continued after Zelda had turned to take up her dialogue, she came smiling down to the footlights, made a sweeping courtesy, and pointed to her throat as she shook her head at the professor, to explain that there could be no encore.

When Mrs. Carr exchanged congratulations with Professor Schmidt at the end—an end marked by tumultuous applause following the *grand finale* by the whole company—almost her first words were:

“Was that girl's throat really sore or not?”

And Herr Schmidt lifted his eyes heavenward and shrugged his shoulders, but refused to commit himself.

Mrs. Forrest and Rodney Merriam were in the audience; Zelda's father had declined to attend.

"Let us speak to Zee and then escape," said Merriam to his sister, as the chairs were being pushed back for the dance that was to follow the play. A few older people were there and they formed a little colony by themselves. Zelda came out presently from the dressing-room, with her arms full of flowers that had been passed across the footlights, and she bore Olive Merriam with her.

"Don't be afraid; not in the least afraid," Zelda said to her cousin as she hastened across the hall to her aunt and uncle.

"Please don't," urged Olive. "It isn't kind to me."

"No danger at all; they're all perfectly amiable when you know how to manage them."

"Aunt Julia, this is a real compliment! Thanks very much. This is Olive Merriam. And, Uncle Rodney, here's the star, to whom I expect you to say something particularly nice. Mr. Merriam, Miss Merriam,"—and Zelda smiled as the old gentleman bowed low over the hand of his brother's daughter.

"Olive Merriam," said Zelda, "is my cousin and my very dearest friend."

Olive was not afraid. She smiled at Rodney Merriam; and there was something very winning in Olive Merriam's smile. Zelda looked demurely at her aunt, who seemed alarmed lest something unpleasant might happen; but Rodney Merriam laughed, half at finding himself caught, and half at the sight of Olive Merriam's blue eyes, her glowing cheeks with their furtive dimples and the fair hair that Zelda was now compelling her to wear in the prevailing mode.

"I am delighted; I am proud of you," he declared quite honestly.

"I think—I may say that I reciprocate," replied Olive. "I haven't seen you for a long time—Uncle Rodney—except at a distance."

"Altogether my fault and my loss! I trust that the distance may be considerably lessened hereafter."

A number of people were watching this by-play with keen interest. Something had surely happened among the Merriams. It had been many years since so many members of the family had been seen together at any social gathering.

"There's a draft somewhere," said Mrs. Forrest, suddenly. "We must be going, Rodney. And now, Zelda, don't stay out all night. Mrs. Carr is going to take you home. You'll be sure to be sick if you're not careful. And"—Zelda was looking at her aunt intently—"Miss Merriam, I do hope you will come to see me. I never go anywhere, you know. And please remember me to your mother."

"And pray remember me, also," said Rodney Merriam, feeling Zelda's eyes upon him.

"Oh, Zee," said her uncle, in a low tone; "it was all fine; but how did Pollock come to be in the show?—I don't care to have you know him."

"Of course I shall know him."

"But I prefer."

"Please don't prefer! I'm having a little fun to-night, and I can't be serious at all. Some other time, *mon oncle*—good night!"

"What do you think of that girl?" asked Mrs. Forrest, when she was alone with her brother in their carriage.

"I think she's very pretty, if you refer to Olive Merriam, and has nice manners," was his reply.

"There seems to be no way of checking Zelda's enthusiasms."

"There is not,"—and Rodney Merriam found a cigar in his pocket and began chewing the end of it; and there was a smile on his face which his sister could not see in the dark; but it was not at all unkind.

"I hope that girl won't take advantage of Zee's kindness," said Mrs. Forrest, as her brother left her at her door.

"I shouldn't worry about her if I were you."

"I certainly shan't; but you were always down on her father."

"I was always a good deal of a fool, too," said Rodney Merriam; and he refused to be taken home in his sister's carriage, but walked homeward from her door through High Street, beating the walk reflectively with his stick.

At the Athenæum Zelda was enjoying herself unreservedly. Her cousin Olive had been presented to a representative Mariona audience in a way that had commanded attention, and Zelda was thoroughly happy over it. She did not care in the least what people might say about the healing of old wounds among the Merriams, or about the general disappointment over her own singing,—she had cared for nothing but to get through her part decently. Her chief pleasure in *Deceivers Ever* was in throwing the principal rôle to Olive; and it gave her the only unalloyed joy of her home-coming to see Olive established socially on a footing that was, she told herself, as firm as her own.

She stood talking to Captain Pollock between dances.

Pollock was the least bit sensitive about his height—and a shadow fell on his usually serene spirit at finding that he must tilt his head the merest trifle to talk to Zelda Dameron.

“How does it feel to be a real angel?” he asked.

“I’m not bright at puzzles; you’ll have to tell me.”

“I’ve heard of heroism on the battle-field and I’ve seen men do some fine things; but you have broken all the records.”

He spoke with feeling. She knew well enough what he meant, but she said with cheerful irrelevancy:

“Have you ever been in Timbuctoo,

Your fortunes to pursue there?

Sir, if you have, you doubtless know

The singular things they do there.”

“That reminds me of Lewis Carroll and my lost youth.”

“It ought to remind you of my little cousin over there. It’s hers. She’s always writing jingles like that.”

“She’s certainly a wonder. As I tried to say a bit ago, you did a gallant thing in changing parts as you did. You might have broken up the show; but we all got through in some way. Your throat’s a lot better now, isn’t it?” he added ironically. “But in seeking your own most unselfish ends you certainly played a most extraordinary trick on the audience and the poor struggling cast. Now there’s a young man standing right back of me, talking to some one whose voice I don’t identify, who must have been considerably injured by the change of stars.”

He referred to Balcomb, who was much swollen with pride by his success in the opera, and who was talking in his usual breathless fashion to a young friend from the country whom he had asked to witness his triumph. Beyond Pollock's head Zelda could see Balcomb's profile, though she could not hear him.

"She's a regular piece, that girl. I was scared to death for fear she'd throw me in that duet—we'd never sung it together—but I carried it through all right. She's that stunning Miss Dameron's cousin. She's rather stuck on me, I'm afraid,—I've done little things for her,—theater and so on, but I'll have to cut it all out. She's amusing, but I can't afford to have her misunderstand my attentions. When a fellow finds that he's got a girl down fine she ceases to be interesting. It's the pursuit that's amusing; but when they begin to expect something—Cunning? well, I should say!"

Pollock heard him distinctly, and he shut his eyes two or three times in a quick way that he had when angry, though he kept on talking to Zelda about the evening's performance.

"I'm afraid you're jealous of Mr. Balcomb. He got more applause than anybody."

"He deserved all he got for making such a monkey of himself."

"He's a man of courage; he probably thought he could afford to do it."

"All of that?" said Pollock.

"A rising young man," continued Zelda.

"A person, I should say, of most egregious and monumental gall,"—and Zelda laughed at his earnestness. She had not heard Balcomb's remark about her cousin,

but she knew he had said something that irritated Pollock. The young officer left her quickly when Leighton came up for the dance that had now begun.

Pollock found Balcomb in a moment. The promoter was standing at the side of the hall, his eyes nervously searching for a girl with whom he had engaged the dance.

"Mr. Balcomb," said Pollock at his elbow, "may I speak to you a moment?"

"Certainly," said Balcomb, in his usual amiable fashion. "Only I'm engaged for this dance and have lost my partner."

"That's my own fix," declared Pollock, "but my errand is brief. Let us step out here."

He led the way to a door opening upon the main stairway of the building and they paused there, Pollock with his back to the door, facing Balcomb. He carried one glove in his hand and was very trim and erect in his evening clothes.

"Mr. Balcomb, I was so unfortunate as to overhear your conversation of a moment ago—with some one I didn't know, but that doesn't matter—in which you referred to a young lady—a young lady who came here to-night under your escort, in terms that a gentleman would not use."

"As a confessed eavesdropper I don't believe it is necessary for you to say anything further," said Balcomb, with heat, and he took a step toward the door of the assembly-room.

Pollock touched him on the shoulder with the tips of his fingers, very lightly. Balcomb was half a head taller

and much bulkier, but the tips of Pollock's fingers seemed to carry a certain insistence, and Balcomb drew back.

"I shall hold you responsible for this, you—"

"I certainly hope you will. As I was saying, you referred to a young lady, who was here under your protection, in terms which no one but a contemptible cur would use of a woman—"

Balcomb's arm went up and he struck at Pollock with his fist.

The officer stood as he had been, but the glove in his right hand slapped smartly upon Balcomb's face, and Balcomb took an involuntary step backward down the stairway.

"In the part of the country that I came from, Mr. Balcomb," Pollock continued in an easy conversational tone, "we do very unpleasant things to bright and captivating people of your stripe"—he took another step forward, and Balcomb, a little white in the face, retreated again—"but in this instance"—Pollock lifted his left hand to his shadowy mustache and gave it a twist; he took another step and Balcomb yielded before him—"I shall let you off with unwarranted leniency."

Balcomb, forced another step downward, had grown red with fury, and again struck at Pollock, but with the result that Balcomb stumbled and retreated two steps instead of one, reaching a landing. With this more secure footing he gained courage.

"You little cur, you little—" he blustered, drawing his face down so that he could glare into Pollock's eyes.

"Yes," said Pollock, calmly; "I have been called little before; so that your statement lacks novelty. As I was

saying,"—and he leaned against the stair-rail with the tips of the fingers of his gloved hand thrust into his trousers pocket, and holding the other glove in his right hand,—“I haven’t time now to go into the matter further, but I am always at your service. It will give me great pleasure to make your excuses to Miss Merriam, or to any other friends you may be leaving behind you—owing to an illness that made it necessary for you to leave—suddenly. Now you will oblige me by continuing on down to the coat room—unattended. There are probably some gentlemen below there that I should very much dislike having to explain matters to.”

Balcomb leaped lightly forward as though to make a rush for the door of the assembly-room.

“Try that again,” said Pollock, seizing him by the collar, and throwing him back, “and I’ll drop you over the banister.”

“You damned little—”

“You have said that before, Mr. Balcomb, without the damn ; but the addition isn’t important. Run along now, like a good boy. I advise you to turn around and go down in a becoming manner,—that’s the idea !”

Some men had entered the lower hall from the smoking-room, and Balcomb greeted them cheerily as he turned and went below as though to join them. Pollock stood above waiting for Balcomb to reappear, and as he waited he resumed his glove and buttoned it with care. The waltz was nearly over, but he stood there leaning against the stair-rail and beating time to the music with his foot, until he saw Balcomb come out of the coat room clad for the street. When Balcomb looked up, Pollock

waved his hand to him graciously, and turned and went back into the hall.

“Miss Merriam,” he said, bowing before Olive, “I very much regret to present Mr. Balcomb’s compliments and to say that he has been unexpectedly called away—pressing business—and he asked me to do myself the honor to see that you don’t get lost. This is our dance.”

CHAPTER XVI

IN OLIVE'S KITCHEN

Olive went from the kitchen to the front door and received Zelda, all aglow from a rapid walk through the cold crisp November air.

"It's the wrong time, of course," said Zelda. "I'm always coming at the wrong time."

"It's always the right time," declared Olive. "But you'll have to excuse me for a few minutes. This is Thanksgiving Day and my headquarters are in the kitchen. There's a new magazine or two—help yourself."

"I'm not using your house as a free reading-room. I dodged church, so I could come and see you. Let me come out and talk. I like your clothes,"—and she put aside her wraps, surveying Olive admiringly.

"Come on, then. I'm making bread,"—and Olive led the way to the kitchen.

"She's making bread, after all the glory of her début! It's just like the interviews with great artists that we read in the newspapers. They're always planting garden-seed or canning fruit, when the reporter calls."

"If I were you, I shouldn't refer to last night, after the trick you played on me. You carried it all off with such a rush! I don't know yet how I came to let you do it."

"You shouldn't talk that way to your poor sick cousin. My throat is still very painful,"—and Zelda put up her hand and coughed desperately.

"That will do, thank you! You can't stay in the kitchen unless you'll be good."

Olive's kitchen was, as she said herself, the best room in the house. Her own paint brush had made it white, and table, range, draining boards were up to date. It was a model kitchen; according to Olive's own ideas, which were so attractive that shortly after her return from college she had written them down in a series of articles for a paper devoted to the interests of women. Pretty things do not cost any more than ugly ones, she held; and there was no reason why the piano should not be kept in the kitchen, if its owner could use it there to the best advantage.

"I hate to give up a single thing," Olive had declared to Zelda, "except blacking the stove. I'd like to draw the line there."

"I wish Polly knew how to make a kitchen look like this,—or that I did! May I sit here? Go on now and talk. Aren't you afraid of mussing your apron?"

Olive was rolling up her sleeves, which she had pulled down before answering the bell. She wore the costume of her teaching office—a blue and white cotton dress. She tied on a white apron, at which Zelda exclaimed mockingly.

"It's in your honor, Lady Zee; and you know that a soiled gingham apron can't get any more *soiled* than a white one."

"You look mighty useful, Olive Merriam, considering how frivolous you were last night. I have a new glory

now,—I'm Olive Merriam's cousin. I expected to find a line of carriages at the door when I came, but I suppose they're afraid to come on a holiday. What are you doing to those pans? Butter? I didn't know you had to do that. I wonder if Polly knows! Hers always burn on the bottom, but I let it go because it's better burnt than underdone. As I was saying, you certainly made Papa Schmidt's opera go tremendously."

"I oughtn't really to speak to you. I forgot in my joy at seeing you that I had resolved to give you up forever. If I hadn't had baking to do, I should have gone to bed and stayed in bed all day. You have put me in a nice box, haven't you? I might have had some friends if you hadn't played that trick on me."

She turned, balancing a symmetrical ball of dough in one hand, and leaned against the kitchen table.

"You look perfectly charming in that make-up," remarked Zelda, composedly. "And with that strange object in your hand you might pose as Liberty delighting the world. What were you saying? Oh, yes! You are going to cast me off and be done with me." And then, as though speaking with a great effort, and clasping her hands at her throat to ease its pain: "My throat isn't really strong yet. The little I did last night must have strained it. So don't harass me!"

"I'd like to laugh at you, but I can't. Everybody thinks I persuaded you to let me take the chief part in the opera to put myself before the public. I'm ashamed of myself! I ought to have refused to go ahead, when I saw that you were making me,—as they say in books,—your plaything. If I had been known to anybody it would have been different; but as it was—"

She bent down with the bread pan and Zelda opened the oven door for her.

"Polly always slams the door. Isn't that right?"

"No, it's noisy; and it doesn't do the bread any good."

"Such wisdom! I must tell Polly that. Now, what are you going to do? I suppose I ought to go. Aunt Julia's neuralgia is very bad, and I must go to see her. Uncle Rodney and father and I are going there for dinner—a real Hoosier Thanksgiving dinner."

"I haven't forgiven you yet, but you may stay here and watch me bake a pie, if you like."

"Pie! How exciting! There's a rolling-pin in that. Let me do the rolling. I've always been crazy to work a roller and Polly won't let me!"

"Well, there's another apron in the closet. You may get that and put it on. It's effective, too," she added, as Zelda drew the apron over her short walking skirt and tied the strings at her waist. "I don't think I can ever believe you again, after yesterday; but assuming that you sometimes tell the truth, tell me, honestly, did you ever make a pie?"

"Humiliating though it be, I must confess that I never, never did," replied Zelda. "It's the rolling that I'm interested in. Where do you keep the machine you do it with?"

"We are going to make this pie in a perfectly orderly manner. The rolling-pin comes in later; but we put all the things handy we're going to need. You can weigh the butter, if you will be good. And you may measure the flour if you won't spill it on the floor. Now you may work this up into dough. You're doing splendidly."

Olive sat down and mingled a lecture on pastry-cooking with a discussion of the opera of the evening before, until she was ready to intrust Zelda with the rolling-pin. The bell rang as Zelda seized the coveted implement and set to work.

"The postman, no doubt; you keep things going, while I answer the bell,"—and Olive ran away.

She was gone several minutes, and came back a little flushed from her encounter.

"Letters?" asked Zelda, without turning round.

"No," said Olive. "It was a caller."

"Well, you got rid of her pretty quickly, I must say."

"It wasn't her; it was a him," said Olive, inspecting Zelda's work.

"Why didn't you bring him in?" asked Zelda.

"I didn't think he would be any help about the pie, so I sent him off."

"Name, please?" and Zelda wheeled about, holding the rolling-pin poised between her hands.

"It was Mr. Balcomb. You needn't look at me that way. He came on an errand."

"Did some one send him with a note; or does he deliver parcels? I should think he would make a capital boy to deliver parcels,—he's so sudden-like!"

"I don't think you're fair to him," said Olive. "He's a poor young man who has his own way to make."

"I'm sorry, Cousin Olive, but he doesn't look pathetic to me. I don't want to seem to be meddling, but that young man irritates me beyond any words."

"You'll never get it rolled out thin if you don't keep right on," said Olive.

Zelda laughed and bore down heavily on the dough.

"Please forgive me—please, Cousin Olive; but Mr. Balcomb makes me think of pie crust some way—or pie crust makes me think of him. I rarely eat pie, so I'm not overworked thinking of him. He's so thin and crisp. You could roll him out and make a nice apple tart of him. Why, Olive Merriam!"

Tears had sprung suddenly to Olive's eyes, and Zelda dropped the rolling-pin and ran to her.

"You poor dear, I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world. Tell me you forgive me!"

"I'm silly, and I know you'll think things—go on now with that crust—there are the pans all ready—but Mr. Balcomb has been very kind to me. He has taken me to the theater sometimes, and sent me things. So I think you're not fair to him."

"Well," said Zelda, "if he's nice to you there isn't anything else to be said—not a word. Do you drop it over the pan like that,—no, let *me* have the knife and I'll cut it. So!"—and she set down the pan and viewed its lining of crust with satisfaction.

"He came," said Olive, with dignity, "to say how sorry he was to have to run off last night, but that he was called away on an urgent business matter and had to go down to his office to meet some people who had come from out of town unexpectedly. And I told him it was all right and please to go away, as I was busy."

"He certainly says some funny things," Zelda went on, palliatingly, "and he was fine in the show. His antics were as good as any professional's."

"He can be awfully funny," said Olive. "And now we'll make some tarts out of the rest of that crust and

use up some canned raspberries that are there on the shelf."

"I'm so very sorry I spoke that way about tarts," said Zelda, with real contrition; "but we'll call them the tarts of peace."

"I wasn't a bit hurt," pleaded Olive, "and I don't care what you say; only he *has* been kind."

"Then let his life be spared!" said Zelda, dramatically. "And now let's make tarts, though we be hanged for it."

A little later, while they awaited results from the oven and again discussed the opera, Olive remarked naively:

"I suppose you have your reasons for treating him that way."

"Whom, what way?"

"Mr. Leighton; you snub him every chance you get."

"Well, he ought to be snubbed; he thinks that because he and uncle are good friends that he's my assistant guardian or something like that. This old-family-friend business makes me tired."

"Well, of course, Captain Pollock isn't an old family friend."

"No; that's one thing in his favor; and another is that he's amusing. I like men to be amusing."

"I suppose they *are* better so!"

"You amazing child, it's the whole thing; don't you know that?"

"I know that you don't think anything of the kind, Zelda Dameron," declared Olive.

CHAPTER XVII

DAMERON BLOCK, 1870

When Zelda asked her father one day where his office was, he answered evasively that it was in the Dameron Block. This was an old-fashioned office building, with a basement and a short stairway leading to the main corridor. It was no longer fashionable, as the better class of lawyers and real estate brokers had sought buildings of a later type that offered electric lights and elevators. The Dameron Block faced the court-house square, and was the habitat of divers small attorneys and real estate men. In the basement below, a justice of the peace sat in judgment next door to a musty old book-shop, where the proprietor, a quaint figure with a great mop of iron-gray hair, sold pens and paper and legal blanks to Dogberry Row, as this quarter of the street was called.

Zelda strayed into this thoroughfare by chance one winter afternoon shortly before Christmas and was arrested by the sight of some old books in the bookseller's window. The venerable bookseller came out into the basement area and spoke to her of the books, holding a volume meanwhile, with his forefinger closed upon the page he had been reading. Yes; he kept French books, he said, and she went into the shop and looked over his shelves of foreign books.

"There is very little demand for them," he said. "Some of these are rare. Here is a little volume of Hugo's poems; very rare. I should be glad if you would take it for a dollar,—any of these poets for a dollar. But of course I can only offer. It is for you to decide."

He took down other volumes, with praise for every one but with shy apology for offering them.

"I shall take the Hugo," said Zelda, presently.

He wrapped it for her carefully, even regretfully, and held the packet for a moment, caressing it with his hands, while she produced a dollar from her purse and took it from him.

"Call again. I have been here for twenty years; Congdon, Dameron Block."

"Yes, Dameron Block," repeated Zelda.

The constables and loungers on the sidewalk in front of the justice's court stared at her as she came out and glanced for a moment at the upper windows of the building. A galvanized iron sign at the eaves bore the name "Dameron Block, 1870," in letters that had long since lost the false aspect of stone given to them originally by gray paint.

Zelda went into the dim entrance and read the miscellaneous signs that were tacked there. One of them was inscribed "E. Dameron, Room 8"; and passing on she presently came to a frosted-glass door, where the same legend was repeated. It was late in the afternoon; possibly her father would go home with her, she thought, and turned the knob.

She entered a dark room on a courtway, evidently used as a place of waiting; there was another room be-

yond, reached by a door that stood half-open. Her father was engaged; his voice rose from the inner room; and she took a chair by the outer door of the waiting-room. She looked about the place curiously. On a long table lay in great disorder many odds and ends—packages of garden-seed under dust that afforded almost enough earth to sprout them; half a dozen fence pickets tied together with a string; and several strata of old newspapers. On the floor in a corner lay a set of harness in a disreputable state of disrepair; and pasted on the walls were yellowed sheets of newspapers containing tables of some sort. Zelda did not know what these were, though any one of the loafers on the curbstone could have enlightened her as to their character,—they were the official advertisements of the sales of tax titles. Ezra Dameron always “talked poor,” and complained of the burden of taxes and street improvements; but he had been the chief buyer of tax titles in the county.

“I’m sure that I’ve been very lenient, very lenient indeed,” Ezra Dameron was saying. “I have, in fact, considered it a family matter, calling for considerate treatment, on the score of my friendship with your husband. If it had been otherwise, I should have been obliged long ago to take steps—steps toward safeguarding the interests—the interests of my trust, I should say.”

“But another extension of two years would be sufficient for me to pay. I wish very much for Olive not to know that her schooling was paid for with borrowed money. She gives me all she earns. Her position is assured, and I am putting aside something every month to apply on the debt. We owe nothing else.”

"But two of these notes are already in default, Mrs. Merriam. I have incurred obligations on the strength of them. A woman can't understand the requirements and exactions of business."

"I am sorry, very sorry, Mr. Dameron. All I ask is this extension. It can't be a large matter to you!"

"I regret more than I can tell you that it is impossible. If it were myself,—if it were my own money that I advanced you, I could perhaps be less insistent, but as it is, this money belongs to another,—in fact, it is part of my daughter's estate. She is perfectly helpless, utterly ignorant of business; it is necessary for me to exercise the greatest care in administering her affairs. It is a sacred trust, Mrs. Merriam, a sacred trust from her dear mother."

"I came to-day," said the woman's voice, apologetically, "hoping that payment could be deferred."

"Yes, to be sure; it's wise to be forehanded. But the loan must be paid at the maturity of the last note, in May. I must close my wife's estate very soon. I have timed all my loans to that end."

The purring voice stole through the anteroom, where Zelda sat forward in her chair, listening with parted lips and wonder and pain in her eyes. The book in her lap fell to the bare floor, making a sharp clatter that startled her. She gave a little gasp and reached for it, scarcely stooping, so intent were her eyes on the door of the inner room; and when she had regained it, she ran into the hall and down the steps to the street.

She turned west toward the gray shaft of the monument and round it, past the little Gothic church, to High Street. She felt a great yearning for sympathy,

for some one to whom she could confess her misery and heartache. It was growing dark, and when she reached her uncle's house, the lights shone brightly in his library. She knew he was there, and that she could, at a word, make his house her home and shake herself free forever from her father. She was always rebuffing and thwarting her Uncle Rodney in his efforts to help her. But at the gate she paused with her hand on the catch. The Japanese boy opened the front door just then to pick up the evening paper, and the hall light fell upon the steps invitingly. But she hurried on. The lights in the houses mocked her; here were homes in a city of homes, and she was as homeless and friendless as though she walked in a wilderness. She came to Mrs. Forrest's house. There, too, a welcome awaited her; but the thought of the overheated rooms, of the cheerless luxury in which her aunt lived, stifled her. She felt no temptation to make any appeal there.

Her pride rose again; she would not break under a burden her mother had borne; and with this thought in her heart, she turned into a side street that led to her father's house and walked slowly homeward.

Without putting aside her wraps she dropped a match into the kindling in the fireplace of the living-room, and waited until the flames leaped into the throat of the chimney. Polly was in the dining-room, showing a new assistant how to lay the table for the evening meal, and she came to the folding doors and viewed Zelda with the interest that the girl always had for her. Polly was Zelda's slave, and she went about half the day muttering and chuckling over what seemed to her Zelda's unaccountable whims.

"Polly," said Zelda, "this is Julius Cæsar's birthday,—or Napoleon Bonaparte's or the Duke of Argyle's—do you understand?"

The black woman showed all her teeth in appreciation.

"And we'll have out the candlesticks,—those very high ones; and you may use that gold-banded china and the real cut glass. And mind,—some terrible thing will happen to you, if you let that new weird young thing out there break a single piece. *Comprenez-vous?* Yes? Then you may return to your enchantments. But mind you, no trifling with your sacred trust! Let those sweet potatoes *sauté* approximate, if they do not fully realize, perfection. And as for that duck—the dear little thing—pray remember that roasting does not mean incineration. You may go now."

Polly departed chuckling and Zelda went to her room.

Her father was reading his newspaper by the fireplace when she came in upon his startled gaze an hour later. She had arrayed herself in a white silk evening gown. He had never before seen her dressed so at their family dinner-table. The long skirt added to her height. Her hair was caught up from her forehead in an exaggeration of the prevailing mode.

"Good evening, father! I thought I'd dress up to-night just for fun, and to get the crinkles out of my things. Isn't this gown a perfect love? It's real Parisian."

She swept past, the rich silk brushing him, and then,—Polly having appeared at the door with her eyes staring from her head,—

"Now let us feast while we may," she said.

She passed before him into the dining-room with an inclination of her head and to her place.

The old man had not spoken and he sat down with painstaking care, finding apparently some difficulty in drawing in his chair. He bowed his head for the silent grace he always said, and raised his eyes with a look of sweet resignation to the girl.

"We are dining *en fête*, father," Zelda began hastily. "I felt that we must be gay to-night,—something seemed to be in the air,—and I thought it well to celebrate. It's funny, isn't it, how every day must be an anniversary of something! I'm sure something noble and cheerful must have happened on this day a hundred years ago. Where *do* you buy celery? I wish you'd tell them that it's perfectly dreadful; this to-day is as tough as wire."

Nothing in the old house ever escaped his sharp eyes. The old china with its gold band, and the cut glass that had not known service for years struck him at once.

Ezra Dameron did not understand much about human nature, though like all cunning people he thought he did. It was beginning to dawn upon him that Zelda was deeper than he had imagined. Perhaps, he said to himself, she was as shrewd and keen as himself; or, he asked again, was she not playing some deep rôle,—even laying a trap for him? He did not know that the moods of a girl are as many as the moods of the wind and sea. He remembered that his wife had been easily deceived. He had crushed the mother; but this girl would not so easily be subdued. The candles made a

soft light upon the table. He lifted his eyes furtively to see whether the gas in the chandelier overhead was lighted; and was relieved to note that the extravagance of the candles was not augmented there. He drew his bony fingers across the table-cloth, feeling its texture critically. He knew that it had been taken from a forbidden shelf of the linen closet. Clearly his rule over the ancient Polly was at an end.

Zelda had little idea of the things that interested her father. He read the morning and evening newspapers through every day except Sunday. The Sunday papers he did not take. He subscribed for several religious newspapers of his denomination, and these, too, he read and pondered. Zelda knew nothing of his own family. He was the only member of it that lived in the state. His correspondence was carried on from his office, and the only letters that the postman left at the Dameron house were the envelopes that poured in steadily, bearing invitations for Zelda, an occasional foreign letter from some friend she had made abroad, and on the first of the month, bills for her own purchases at the shops. She always found it difficult to talk to her father; to-night she felt strangely inclined to say something that would vex him.

The maid went about the table in white apron and cap and waited on them with a grin on her face.

"Won't you take some more of the apple sauce, father? Angeline, the apple sauce. Those were superb apples that came in from the farm the other day, father. I suppose the farm really pays for itself,—you are always sending in nice things from there."

"Oh, not at all! Everything I raise is very costly, very costly."

He looked at her suspiciously. At any mention of money or expense he put himself on guard.

"But the tenant you have out there must make his living—"

"Not at all. I can show you my books. I keep a faithful account; it's been a loss each year since I took it." He spoke defensively, in spite of himself.

"Oh, please don't show me any accounts! They must be very, very depressing;" and she shrugged her shoulders.

"To be sure! to be sure! quite that!" He laughed with a real heartiness.

"I suppose many people have troubles about money," she went on. "Making both ends meet, I think they call it."

"To be sure, Zee. God's poor are always with us."

She bent over suddenly and inspected the handle of a spoon intently.

"But when people can't pay—rents, mortgages, whatever their troubles are—then what do they do?"

"The balance must be struck in some way. A debt is a debt. A creditor is entitled to his pay. It is the law of the land."

"The law; yes, I suppose there is the law. But there aren't any laws for the poor, are there? I heard that—in France. And the peasants over there didn't look as though they had any laws on their side."

"It's very different here; quite different. We are all poor here. This is God's great republic of the poor, as one of our poets has said."

"That sounds well, but I'm afraid it's only poetry," said Zelda, soberly. And then, smoothing her crumbs into a little heap for the girl to brush away:

"In anything that you have—or I have—we shall deal very kindly with poor people, shan't we?"

His restless fingers were playing with his coffee spoon and his eyes were on the table-cloth. He looked up now and met Zelda's gaze bent gravely upon him.

"Yes, what we have—what we have—" there was a slight stress on the pronoun, as though he wished to emphasize the fact of their common interests—"we must use—as God would have us."

He nodded his head back and forth, with a far look in his eyes that was intended to express spiritual exaltation. It was not Zelda's purpose to disclose the fact of her visit to his office; she had gone as far as she dared. He had begun to interest her, not so much as a person who had any claim on her affection, but as a curious character—even as an eccentric and untrustworthy character in a story; yet she felt toward him somewhat as a parent may feel toward a deformed child, conscious, indeed, of a moral deformity that fascinated her.

"Yes, of course; I am sure that we want to do right," she said, with the slightest accent on the pronoun, in imitation of his own manner of the moment before.

When they returned to the living-room he tended the fire; and when he took up his paper nervously, from habit, he put it down again, and began to talk. Almost for the first time since Zelda's return, he showed an interest in her foreign experiences, and led her to speak of them. And she exerted herself to be entertaining. He had supposed that Mrs. Forrest would

prejudice Zelda against him during the years in which she had kept the girl away; but his daily scrutiny had discovered no trace of disrespect or contempt in her attitude toward him.

The striking resemblance between Margaret Dameron and her daughter impressed him to-night; but there were puzzling differences. He was conscious of depths in Zelda that he could not fathom. During her recital of the story of a mishap that had befallen her aunt and herself at a carnival in Rome, it occurred to him that she was showing him this graciousness to-night in the hope of wresting money from him. He lost interest and turned to his newspaper abruptly. Zelda picked up the book she had purchased at Congdon's shop and fell to reading; and after he had turned his paper restlessly for half an hour, he rose to go to bed.

It had been on her tongue several times to ask him boldly about the debt of Olive's mother, even if it should be necessary to confess that she had overheard his conversation with Mrs. Merriam; but this might cause an unpleasant scene. No great haste was necessary, she judged; and so she waited. She could probably persuade her aunt or uncle to help her in the matter when the time came, if no other way should occur to her.

"Good night, father!"

She rose and watched him from the room; but he did not look at her again.

"Good night, daughter," he said, a little vaguely, as though he had forgotten her existence.

No one came and she sat looking steadily at the dying fire. The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts, says the poet; but their natural habitat

should be a realm of light and peace and not dark vales of uncertainty and doubt. When she went at last to her room, the old cedars outside her windows were moaning softly. She found a satisfaction in bolting her door, and then she drew from her writing-table the little book, tied with its faded ribbon, and opened it to the charge her mother had written,—those last pitiful words,—and read them over and over again, until they seemed to be audible whispers in the room:

“Perhaps I was unjust to him; it may have been my fault; but if she can respect or love him I wish it to be so.”

She lay awake staring into the dark for half the night, with tearless eyes, one hand clasping the little book under her pillow.

CHAPTER XVIII

ZELDA LIFTS A BURDEN

Copeland, the lawyer who never practised, knew Mariona pretty well, and he was responsible for the remark that while women in High Street continued to admonish their maids from second-story windows as to the relation between employer and employee, there was no manner of use in trying to be a city.

Mariona was still a good deal of a village and gossip spread through its streets like news in the Sudan. But it must be said that the Mariona gossips who had been expecting an explosion among the Merriams since Zelda Dameron came home were greatly disappointed. Zelda's life differed in no important particular from that of other girls of her circle. She lived with her father, which was wholly proper; she went about to luncheons, teas and balls and derived amusement from them in a perfectly normal, natural way; she had a voice, and when she was asked to sing, she sang; and she struck every one as being thoroughly unaffected and amiable. It became known that she could tell a story, and her reputation among girls as a *raconteur* soon dimmed that which her singing had earned for her. A girls' luncheon in Mariona, as elsewhere, is a function where a dozen girls, more or less, assemble to eat un-

wholesome combinations of food to the accompaniment of rapid exclamations about nothing in particular. Zelda gained a hearing at first because she was a new girl in town, but her audience was assured when it became known that she could tell a story.

She told her stories with the gravity that is second nature in the born story-teller; and her fund of anecdotes of personal misadventure was seemingly inexhaustible. Her account of the way in which she and her aunt had been ushered by mistake into a train bearing a royal funeral party at Berlin, and of how an aged duke had worked himself into a state of apoplexy in trying to determine just who the Americans were; and of how, finally, when a countess and her daughter, for whom the Americans had been mistaken, were missed, the train was carried back to the Berlin station,—this incident related with trifling but illuminative details,—of how the people looked, of the yells of the duke to his servant not to forget the lunch basket; the grim rage of the master of ceremonies when he discovered that Zelda and her aunt had been put aboard by mistake,—made a story that convulsed her auditors.

Zelda saw much of Morris during the winter. He went often to the old house in Merriam Street in spite of the fact that he assured himself constantly that she did not interest him more than other girls. She continued to delight in plaguing him, particularly before her uncle, who learned, however, not to praise Morris to Zelda. Mrs. Forrest pretended to be a diligent chaperon, but Mariona social affairs did not amuse her, and she went out very little. Frequently Merriam took Zelda to the theater; now and then he connived with

Morris to the end that Olive should be asked, and the four would go afterward for a supper at Merriam's house. Zelda brought Olive more and more into touch with her own life. She knew no happier day than Christmas, when Mrs. Forrest,—not, however, without urging,—gave a family dinner to which Ezra Dameron, Olive and her mother sat down at the same board, with Rodney presiding. There were times when Zelda's courage failed,—when the shadow of her mother's unhappiness fell darkly upon her; but she made no sign to the world. So the winter passed, and in the first bright wistful days she went forth with Zan to find the spring.

"I have not heard you speak of your aunt and uncle of late," said Ezra Dameron to Zelda one day, after she had been for an outing with Olive.

"I saw Aunt Julia this afternoon. She isn't well; she suffers a great deal."

"She doesn't look like a sick woman. She was always quite robust."

"*She's* robust enough, but her nerves aren't. She has asked me to go away with her again,—she likes going about, and she has planned to visit a number of summer places."

"If you don't go, what will she do?" and the old man looked at Zelda with a gleam of humor in his small gray eyes.

"Well, I have asked her to come to the farm."

A smile crossed Ezra Dameron's face.

"I am very glad you did. It would be a capital arrangement."

"But she won't come. She does not like that sort of thing. She likes to be where there's something doing."

"Yes, yes; a worldly woman; a very worldly woman,"—and Dameron wagged his head as he buttered his roll. He was silent for several minutes, and when he spoke it was in a tone of kindness.

"And so you are coming with me, Zelda? I had hoped you would. I have wished it so much that I have not pressed you to commit yourself. I knew that your aunt would be likely to offer something more attractive than a summer at The Beeches."

"Yes, father; of course I shall go with you. I have never had any other intention."

"You are very good to me, Zee. I am grateful to you for many things. An old man is very poor company for a young girl. I had feared that you might not be satisfied here. Your uncle and aunt have never treated me fairly. We have nothing in common. I am glad to find that they have not estranged you and me; the paternal relation is a very beautiful one; very beautiful."

The black maid was changing their plates, and Zelda rested her arms on the edge of the table and looked at him with deep, searching eyes. She knew instantly when he passed from words that represented honest feeling to his more usual note of hypocrisy.

"Your mother," the old man continued, and she started, for he had rarely mentioned her mother; "your mother was a very gentle woman. She had none of your uncle's violence—Rodney is very violent—and she was not a worldly woman like your Aunt Julia. She had her fling. She had enjoyed a gay youth, but with marriage she settled down. She was an admirable woman—an admirable woman." He grew pensive as he stirred his coffee. He started slightly when he looked up and

found Zelda's eyes bent gravely upon him. She said nothing, and he went on.

"You are very like your mother. You have her looks—and she was very beautiful; but she had not quite—your spirit. No; she was a more subdued type. I could always understand your mother; but I am not always sure that I understand you, Zee. But you are very kind. I am very proud to have you here with me."

She rose and walked into the living-room. He always waited for her to pass, bowing his stooped figure slightly; and to-night he smiled at her; but she passed swiftly and did not look at him. There were times when it was impossible for her to speak to him.

Her father had spoken often during the winter of the farm. Zelda's willingness to go there was a great relief to him; and when she suggested that she should like to ask Olive to spend the whole of her vacation with them he made no objection. He knew that she saw Olive frequently; Zee had asked her cousin to the house for meals several times since the Dramatic Club episode, and her father had treated Olive with his usual formal courtesy. The main thing with Ezra Dameron was to keep Zelda away from her aunt and uncle; and it flattered his vanity that she remained with him so steadfastly and took apparently so filial an interest in his happiness and comfort.

Zelda went to Olive at once with her invitation.

"I'd be delighted, of course, Zee; but you mustn't make it hard for me to refuse. This is my busy summer; we have to move!"

"Oh!" said Zelda.

"We're mortgaged; that's the trouble with us; we're

not only mortgaged, but we can't pay! So we hope to find another house somewhere and get out of the way."

It was the first reference Olive had made to any financial difficulty, and she tried to pass it off lightly.

"I suppose," said Zelda, who was thinking very hard, "that one simply has to have a mortgage; just as though it were measles or croup or scarlet fever."

"Oh, mortgages aren't at all serious—not necessarily fatal—if you don't take cold or expose yourself before it's over."

"How does one contract a mortgage?" said Zelda. "Are there microbes?"

"I caught mine at college," said Olive. "We blew our substance on education. I just found it out recently. Mother has been carrying the burden of it all by herself. The subject isn't pleasant. Let us talk of something else."

"Where do you keep your mortgage?" asked Zelda, half-seriously. "How does one get at the beast?"

"Ours seems to be in a bank just at present," answered Olive, evasively.

"That sounds formidable. But it's too bad that you have to move. Harrison Street is the most charming street in town. I can't think of you as living anywhere else except in this pretty house."

"You'll have to, for we move almost at once, as they say in stories."

Zelda's father continued to pay a sum every month to her credit at the bank, and money matters were rarely or never mentioned between them. She did not understand how anxious he was to avoid any clash with Rodney Merriam over the management of her property;

and she did not appreciate the smallness of the sum he gave her compared with the full amount her property should have earned. Zelda was spoken of in Mariona as an heiress, and it was the general belief that she would have not only the property left her by her mother, but the large estate which Ezra Dameron had been accumulating through many years. There, too, were Mrs. Forrest and Rodney Merriam, who were childless; both were rich by local standards.

When, one afternoon a week later, she decided to speak to her father about Olive's perplexity, she went to his office in the Dameron Block and made no effort to conceal the fact that she had come on business. Her father was poring over his accounts as she stood suddenly on the threshold of the private room.

"Why, Zee, what brings you here?" he exclaimed.

The sight of her gave him a shock, as she had been in his mind; the book over which he had been poring was the cash book of his trusteeship. He marked his place with a scrap of paper and turned to her.

"I came on an errand," said Zelda. "I don't think your housekeeping is well done," she added, glancing about the room.

"It serves me very well," said the old man. "Business is only to be considered as business."

"I suppose that's a warning; but I really came on a little business, father."

"Oh!" He had no idea that she had ever visited the office before. He thought on the instant that she had come for money.

"I have just heard that Olive Merriam and her mother are in trouble,—that is, money trouble."

He looked at her quickly, and searched her with his sharp eyes. The Merriams had been trading on Zelda's friendship, he decided, and he smiled to himself as he settled back in his chair, determined to thwart any quixotic plan that Zelda might broach in their behalf.

"I imagine that they have very little—very little," he said.

"I know nothing of their affairs; but I have just learned that they expect to move, and when I asked Olive why, she said they owed a debt they couldn't pay."

"They live on Harrison Street. I have seen the place. It's a very comfortable cottage, isn't it?" he asked.

"It's a charming little house. But it's their things; it's what Olive is and does that makes it attractive. Do you happen to know what this debt is?" she asked. He thought there might be a pitfall here and he answered at once:

"Yes; I hold the mortgage. It's in the bank for collection."

"She didn't tell me that you held it. She said a bank had it. The money was borrowed to pay Olive's way through school. Did you know that was the way of it?"

"I think perhaps Mrs. Merriam said so."

"If she said so of course that was the reason. She is a very good woman; quite fine, I think."

"Certainly. I didn't mean to imply that she had not been quite frank with me. But people are sometimes tempted by their necessities into slight prevarications."

He smiled and chuckled at his own wisdom in having learned this great fact in human nature.

"Mrs. Merriam has a debt to pay, and if she can't pay it she will lose the house," continued Zelda. "The debt is to you."

"To me as trustee," he corrected.

"Is it, then, something of mine, father?"

Dameron bowed his head.

"Your surmise is quite correct. I hold, as trustee for you, several notes, given by Mrs. Merriam. They're now in default and in the bank for collection."

"I'm sorry I didn't know that earlier, father. I wish you had told me. I have been seeing a good deal of my Cousin Olive. I like her immensely; I have been to her house familiarly, and she has been to see me pretty often, when she could get away from her work. I didn't know, of course, that I was even remotely their creditor. The situation isn't exactly comfortable, now that I know it."

"I'm sorry that the matter should have risen; but there is no reason why they should transfer their burdens to your shoulders, Zee."

"I hope you understand that they have never mentioned this subject or hinted that they owed you or me. I only know that they feel they must leave the house. I fancy that they are being pushed by the bank—to pay the money."

"The bank has, of course, no alternative in the matter. It's their business to collect." And this fact seemed to give Ezra Dameron pleasure.

"But if the owner of the note doesn't want to push the people who made the debt,—"

"It is very bad business to carry overdue paper. New notes have to be given in such cases."

It was clear to Zelda that her father had no sympathy with her liking for the Merriams or her wish to help them in their difficulty. She was sure that she could manage in some way to stop the pressure that was being

brought to bear on them, and she hoped to do it through her father without going to her uncle, who would, she knew, give her any money she might ask, after he had made a row about it. But it pleased her to carry the matter through with her father.

"What is the amount, father?"

"Two thousand dollars,—with interest; with accumulated interest."

Zelda smiled in relief. She could comprehend two thousand dollars.

"And how much is the house worth?"

"About five thousand, possibly. But there is no market for such property just at present. The trend of real estate is all in another direction."

"Then they'd better stay there, if no one would want the house. I'm sure *we* can't move."

The old man smiled patronizingly.

"You don't understand business, my child. It is well that your affairs are in trust. I have lent a good deal of money for you, and I am proud to say that I have never lost a cent, principal or interest."

"I'm sure you have done the best that could be done for me, but now I'm going to ask a favor. I want to carry this loan, if it has to be carried, personally. I want you to make it over to me, and then take it out of my allowance, or charge it to me in the trusteeship. I suppose I might buy it of you,—that would be more businesslike; but I haven't more than two hundred dollars. Maybe you'd sell it to me for that, father, as a special favor?"

The old man shook his head and laughed.

"It is to guard you against just such philanthropy

that I am your trustee. You had better know nothing of these things, Zee."

"But my own aunt and cousin! I hope all my money isn't lent to my relatives."

"No; relatives are poor pay," said the old man, and he rubbed his hands together and chuckled; but he was pondering the matter seriously. At that moment he really needed all the money he could accumulate, and he had every intention of bringing suit on the Merriam notes and foreclosing the mortgage; but, after all, the amount was small, and it was better to let Zelda have her way than to risk an appeal to her uncle, who might take it into his head to ask embarrassing questions about the condition of the trusteeship. Ezra Dameron had gone his own way so long that the idea of submitting his affairs to the scrutiny of another was altogether repugnant to him.

"My dear child, your kindness of heart pleases me. It is a very beautiful Christian spirit that prompts you to help carry another's burdens."

He bent his head slightly; he was afraid to refuse to grant Zelda's wish; but perhaps in permitting her to help her unfortunate relatives he would gain the favor of Heaven.

"I will draw the notes from the bank and let the matter rest for the present, Zee, if you very much wish it."

"If that will save them further trouble, that will do."

"I shall give the bank notice in a day or two," said Dameron, reluctantly. He wished that Zelda would go. He did not at all like the idea of having her visit him in his office, and to-day he was engrossed with important

computations. He wished to be rid of her, but she rose so suddenly that he was startled.

"Why, father, I couldn't think of troubling you with a thing of this sort when you're doing it as a favor to me! What bank is it? The one where I keep my account? Oh, I know them over there. I'm going down that way anyhow, and I'll tell them you don't want those notes collected. Thank you ever so much."

"No, no; I'll have to see about it personally. You mustn't interfere in the matter at all!" he almost shouted at her. But she had no idea of trusting him, and she walked straight toward the door, at which she turned.

"It's splendid of you to let me do it. And please don't be late for dinner again to-night. It's a new trick of yours, and Polly doesn't like it at all. Good-by."

Two thousand dollars looked smaller to Ezra Dameron now than ever before in his life. His thoughts were with larger matters than mortgage loans. It was better to drop the Merriam loan altogether than to invite a scrutiny of the affairs of his trusteeship, he reflected; and Zelda had hardly reached the street before he was again deep in his figures.

Zelda went directly to the bank and sought Burton, the cashier, whom she had met several times at parties. He gave her a seat by his desk near the front window. He was sure that she had come to solicit for a charity, and she was so handsome that he rather enjoyed his peril.

"I have come from my father to speak about a business matter. He is very sorry that he can't come himself. There are some notes here for collection, given by Mrs. Thomas Merriam to my father. He thought, or—I mean, they were to have been collected, but it was all

a mistake about them. He wished me to say that nothing was to be done."

"Excuse me one moment, Miss Dameron."

He went to the note-teller's cage and brought the notes, which were pinned to the mortgage.

"Your father wishes nothing done in the matter?" he asked, laying the slips of paper before Zelda.

"No," she answered slowly, eying the notes curiously. "I suppose I may as well take them with me,—to save my father the trouble of coming for them."

"That's a little—irregular, I suppose," said the young man, doubtfully, but he laughed.

"I suppose it is," said Zelda, "but father was very anxious that nothing should be done, so I'll just take them along. Your bank is so big that some one might forget a little thing like this."

The young man hesitated and was lost. Zelda crumpled the papers between her gloved fingers and closed her fist upon them.

"There's something else I have intended speaking to you about," she said, dismissing the notes carelessly. "You haven't had any nice new money in your bank for a long time, Mr. Burton. And old bills are perfectly horrible. I shouldn't think people would stand it—these old, worn-out bills. Suppose a new bank should start up with a lot of new money—you wouldn't last a day."

The cashier laughed; Miss Dameron had a reputation for saying amusing and unexpected things.

"I'll ask the teller to keep a fresh supply for you. We don't want to lose your account, Miss Dameron."

"Thank you, so much. And if father should come in

please tell him I have the notes. I might miss him, you know."

The cashier found a moment of leisure in which to speak to the president, an elderly gentleman with a well-trimmed beard and a fondness for red scarfs.

"There's something doing in the Dameron family," Burton announced.

"Has the old man murdered the girl or is he just torturing her to prolong the agony?" said the president.

"The girl's all right. She has the whip hand."

"She may think she has; but he's a keen one, is Ezra."

"Miss Dameron was just in to get those notes of Thomas Merriam's widow we have for collection. The old man told me yesterday to go ahead and collect them without delay. The daughter came in this afternoon and said her father was very anxious that Mrs. Merriam should not be disturbed. He was even so worried about it that he sent Miss Dameron around to get the notes. I imagine he was troubled to death about it."

The cashier thrust his hands into his pockets and grinned.

"I suppose she gave you a receipt for the notes."

"No. One doesn't ask Miss Dameron for receipts," replied the cashier. "I'd have given her all the government bonds in the vault if she had asked for them."

"You speak as though you were sorry she hadn't."

"I guess the old man has met his match," said the cashier. "Miss Dameron has struck up an intimacy with her cousin, Olive Merriam, whose mother owes E. Dameron, Esquire, money. When E.'s daughter heard the money was to be collected she told him it was no good and pulled him off. And being a bright young woman

she came around herself for the notes. She's on to the old man like a million of brick."

"Well," said the president, conservatively, "he's an old customer of ours. We must not lose him."

"That would be a real loss," said the cashier. "The daughter comes in once a week to cash a check, and I couldn't bear to part with that. The sight of her coming in in that sweepy, on-wings-from-heaven way of hers lifts my spirit like a cocktail."

"You have it bad," said the president. "If you're going to that clearing-house meeting you'd better skip."

Zelda locked the mortgage and notes in her own desk, with no intention of giving them to her father, unless he should demand them. When he came home in the evening he seemed to be lost in meditation, and after a silent meal he studied his papers while Zelda sat and read.

She had no longer the consolation of the open fire, which, though an ugly thing of coal, had nevertheless made many of the winter evenings tolerable. The open windows now admitted the street noises, and the cries of the neighborhood children at play stole into the room. There was something stifling in her life; she felt sometimes that she could not breathe. She sat for long with a book in her hands, but with her eyes upon the wall; and, as she was thus lost in her thoughts, she was aware suddenly that her father's eyes were bent upon her.

"Oh, Zee," he said when she turned to him, "what was it you asked me to-day about Mrs. Merriam's loan? I have been so occupied that I don't quite remember what we decided to do about it."

There was a senile quaver in his voice; but she knew that he did not speak the truth.

"You said you would withdraw the notes from the bank, and you let me go to explain about it. I brought the papers home and put them away in my desk."

"Yes, yes; I believe that was it. Yes; to be sure. So you have the notes. Well, you'd better hand them to me, —quite at your convenience."

"Certainly, father."

He was satisfied and turned again to his endless computations.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PATOKA FLATS

Jack Balcomb, walking through an alley that ran parallel with Jefferson Street, marked the unmistakable figure of Ezra Dameron ahead of him. This alley was called Ruby Street for no reason that any one knew. It was lined with the rear doors of Jefferson Street shops on one side and those of jobbing houses on the other, and, as it was narrow, its traffic was usually congested. A few saloons were squeezed into corners here and there and in one large room opening directly on the alley a dealer in margins maintained an office.

Balcomb paused a moment to watch Dameron, who dodged in and out among trucks, horses and hurrying pedestrians with quick, eager steps.

"I bet a dollar you're going for a drink," Balcomb remarked under his breath; but the old man passed a saloon and went on. He seemed to be in haste, and Balcomb stepped into the middle of the alley and watched him, until he reached the broker's office, which he entered without looking around.

Balcomb whistled. "Worse than drink," he reflected, and went up to his own office.

Balcomb's mind seethed with schemes these days. He sought to give an air of seriousness to his business by

carrying in the daily press an advertisement which read, "J. Arthur Balcomb, Investment Broker," and he inscribed the same legend on his stationery. The solid business men of Mariona regarded him a little warily; but he had carried through several enterprises with considerable dash, and, as he cultivated the reporters, his name frequently appeared in the newspapers. The building of interurban trolley lines was bringing the surrounding towns more and more into touch with the capital. The country banker and the small capitalist were now much seen in the streets of Mariona. They were learning the lingo of metropolitan business; many of them had found it convenient to enroll themselves as non-resident members of the Commercial Club, and Jack Balcomb's office proved a pleasant rendezvous. Here they could use his stenographers, and the long-distance telephone was theirs to command. The banks and trust companies were a trifle large for these interurban capitalists; but Jack Balcomb accommodated himself to great and small. Prosperous farmers, who were finding it pleasant to run into the capital, now that the street-car passed their door, learned much from Balcomb, who had the rosy imagination and sublime zeal that they lacked. Balcomb had organized the Patoka Land and Improvement Company to give the interurbanites a chance to taste the sweets of large enterprises.

Balcomb found a group of men waiting for him in his office and he sent them into his private room while he dictated in a loud tone to one of his stenographers. It was a letter to a famous Wall Street banking house and referred in large figures to a certain or uncertain bond deal which, from the terms of the letter, the New

York house and Balcomb were carrying on together. It was, to be sure, a letter that would never encumber the mails, but this made no difference to Balcomb, who gave it what he called the true commercial literary finish.

He left the stenographers to themselves with the solemn injunction that he was not to be disturbed; then he entered his private office briskly and was soon talking breathlessly to half a dozen auditors.

"We haven't merely to crowd in every modern improvement, gentlemen; we've got to anticipate improvements! There's nothing so stale and unprofitable as an old flat. The crowd follows the newest thing. We must have novel features,—all we can get. If it's likely to be a good thing to pipe the house for buttermilk, all right; we'll fix it that way. If roof gardens are getting common we'll not have any. Just at present I'm for a library on the top floor, with splashing fountains concealed by palms in the center; and a ball-room with a stage where they can have amateur theatricals and a big Christmas tree and that sort of thing. It'll waste room, of course, but we'll make the tenants pay for it. Rent it? Well, I guess yes! We'll get tired of putting names on the waiting list!"

He stood with a pile of architect's sketches before him, disclosing to his associates of the Patoka Land and Improvement Company his scheme for an ideal flat. Jack Balcomb always wore good clothes; they added to his air of plausibility. His vandyke beard was certainly becoming and his brown eyes were handsome, albeit a trifle restless and unsteady.

"Now," said Balcomb, standing away from the drawings, "I don't want you gentlemen to drop dead of heart

disease or any little thing like that; but I've got my principal idea to spring."

He produced a box of cigars and passed it round and then carried a lighted match from one to the other with deferential courtesy. He liked to make them wait—to tease their curiosity. He lighted his own cigar deliberately and smoothed the blue prints on the table carefully as he continued:

"You gentlemen will admit that there are plenty of apartment houses down-town. Every old corner is getting one. Every lone widow in the community takes her life insurance money and blows it into a flat and thinks it safer than government bonds. But I've got an idea worth two of the best of them. I wish to thunder we could copyright it, it's so good."

He let a dreamy look come into his eyes while the grave incorporators of the Patoka Land and Improvement Company smoked and listened. He had dropped the "we" in a casual way, but it had reached the right spot in the breasts of the interurbanites.

"It's up to us to do something new; and it has struck me that a ten-story flat, with every comfort and luxury provided, located away from the heat and dirt of the city, but accessible by car-line—not more than twenty minutes from the monument—is the thing we're looking for. Instead of gazing out on smoke-stacks our tenants will look down on trees! Does it sound good to you?"

His audience smoked on quietly and Balcomb continued. They liked to hear him talk. He was an attractive figure as he leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

"We can afford to give them some green grass to look

at by going out of town. Babies, pianos and dogs are excluded from all well-regulated flats, but if we should be a little tolerant toward babies an acre of God's green earth would be a great thing for them. Just see how it grows on you, gentlemen! Now, in the same connection we'd run an ideal dairy a little farther out, to give the tenants real cream and butter like their mothers used to make. Say, I don't see how the down-town flats will do any business after we get going! If anybody asks questions about the milk we can prove it was good by the cows!"

He laughed and they all grinned in sympathy with his plan and in admiration of his genius.

"But where are you going to get all this?" asked Van Cleve, his attorney, who frequently acted as interlocutor at such meetings.

"That's not so easy. You've got to get on the best street and on a good car-line, and you've got to go north. Remember, there's a park system going out that way right up the creek. A park system and a boulevard would be worth millions to us. There are only two or three sites possible and the best of all is the corner where High Street crosses Ripple Creek. It looks awful good to me anywhere along there. Twenty minutes from Jefferson Street, gentlemen; all the comforts of the city; all the joys of the country. Now—" with a change of tone, "this is all strictly *inter nos*, as Doc Bridges used to say at college. This is our scheme and we don't want a lot of little real estate fakirs crossing our trail. If I may be a bit confidential and philosophical, I'll warn you against three classes of men—plumbers, real estate agents and preachers in plug hats and shining alpaca

coats who handle a line of Arizona mining stock on the side."

They all laughed and he sat down to give them a chance to ask him questions. Up to a certain point he always did all the talking; but he knew when to quit. He submitted himself to their cross-examination graciously. They were simple, hard-headed men, and he answered them patiently and carefully. He had accumulated a great fund of data relating to the life of such structures as he proposed building: the cost of maintenance; the heating and lighting questions and the matter of service. Much of this was wholly new to the country capitalists; it was novel and it was interesting and there was a glamour about it that charmed them.

"You'll go over to the club for luncheon, gentlemen," he said, when the whistles blew at twelve o'clock and several of his syndicate drew out their watches,—“with me,” he added. “We'll go about one.”

Most of them were used to dinner at twelve at home and they were hungry; but luncheon at the club was in keeping with their new development, and they waited patiently until young Midas should be ready to lead them.

After seeing them fed at the Commercial Club he parted with them, with the understanding that he was to search for a proper site for the Patoka Flats, as the apartment house was to be called, and report on a day fixed. He returned to his office for a further conference with Van Cleve, his lawyer. The flat project was uppermost in Balcomb's mind, and he was bent on pushing it through. His interurbanites had already subscribed for considerable stock and he was reasonably sure of getting

all the money he needed. Times were good; there was plenty of capital seeking investment, and the incorporators of the Patoka Land and Improvement Company were men of considerable influence in their several communities.

"I say, Van Cleve," remarked Balcomb to the lawyer, "we're going to make a big winner out of this. Some of the things I've put through are jolly rotten; but this flat scheme is away up and out of sight the best thing I ever tackled."

"Those farmers are stuck on it, all right," said Van Cleve. "You certainly know how to blow hot air."

Van Cleve had come to town to practise law, and had fallen in with Balcomb at a boarding-house where they both lived. Balcomb had taken soundings in the shallow waters of Van Cleve's intellect and he had decided that the young man would prove useful. Van Cleve had a retreating chin, a corn-silk mustache and pale-blue, near-sighted eyes; but he had an allowance from his father, which in some degree minimized these disadvantages. The elder Van Cleve was a banker in an Ohio River town and Balcomb was cultivating country bankers, with whom he was building up business in the sale and purchase of securities.

"There's only one place for that flat," remarked Balcomb, musingly. "That's old Dameron's place on the creek at High Street. The malaria is all drained out of there now and it's getting more valuable every day. The extension of the park system along the creek and the building of the boulevard will give the region a whirl. It's only a country-town idea that apartment houses

must be built on the court-house square; but we'll show them, all right."

He opened a plat book and pointed out to Van Cleve the location of the Dameron ground.

"I suppose the old man will throw a fit when I ask him for a price on the strip. Everybody seems to be afraid of Ezra Dameron; but I'm not half as much afraid of him as I am of his daughter, who's a pleasant rest for tired eyes, all right. Ezra's a queer old party, with a chilly manner and an alluring smile; but I rather flatter myself that I know how to handle difficult customers."

"I guess you can handle them if anybody can," said Van Cleve, admiringly.

"I've mastered a few—just a few—of the arts of persuasion. In fact, I prefer a tough case—something that gives a little resistance. It's more satisfactory."

Balcomb stretched himself and yawned. He was not averse to Van Cleve's admiration, but sunned himself in it.

"I'll drop around and see the old man just about now. There's nothing like keeping things going after you get started. Let me consider. I'm not sure just what shade of gloves I ought to put on for this interview. Perhaps ox-blood red would do just as well as anything."

There was a file case in the corner, with many drawers bearing neat labels inscribed with such titles as "Greene County Coal"; "Cement Reports"; "Bank Statements", and "U. S. Treasurer". He pulled out a drawer labeled "U. S. Treasurer" and carelessly turned over its contents—several pairs of gloves in a variety of shades.

"Rather a neat thing in chiffonniers," he remarked.

Van Cleve was staring at him in amazement. He never ceased to wonder at Balcomb.

"This, my friend, is designed for the edification of rubbernecks. The titles are rather impressive, and they are not all a sham. But if you're in a hurry to change your necktie at any time come in, old man, and try on one of mine. You'll find an assortment of new spring shades under 'Missouri Zinc.'"

Van Cleve grinned his appreciation.

"You ought to have gone on the stage, Balcomb. Your province is art, not commerce."

"Don't worry, my dear young friend from the banks of *La Belle Rivière*. Now before I go on my perilous journey to see the ancient Dameron—"

He pulled out a drawer labeled "Kentucky Central R. R."

"This is no deception at all," he continued, as he took out a bottle of whisky and a glass. "It's from Kentucky; it's for central application,"—tapping his chest—"and it's rare rye. On the water wagon? I don't often indulge myself; but it's well to prepare oneself before going up against a hard frost. Now"—his manner changing—"we've got to increase our capital stock; you'd better get busy in the intervals of your engrossing professional duties and do something real noble in that line."

He gave Van Cleve a memorandum of what he wanted and walked out briskly, disposing of several callers who waited in the outer office, where the typewriters rattled tirelessly.

CHAPTER XX

TWO GENTLEMEN BECOME ACQUAINTED

In a town like Mariona the tradition of riches is almost as good as the proved fact. It had been said for years that Ezra Dameron was the possessor of great wealth. How, indeed, could he be otherwise, when he was a miser and never spent any money? Old Roger Merriam had died one of the richest men in the state, and in dividing his property he had favored his daughters, so that Mrs. Forrest and Mrs. Dameron had received larger shares than their brothers. Copeland, the lawyer who never practised, possessed a great fund of useful information, and he estimated the value of Margaret Dameron's estate at four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and Copeland was a conservative man. Ezra Dameron's personal estate was popularly supposed to be equally large, but this was something that no one knew anything about.

Ezra Dameron had been called a hard man. There was an uncharitable smile that went usually with the mention of his name. The friends of the Merriams said that he was an ugly blackguard; but there were people who did not admire the Merriams, and these were inclined to the belief that his wife's family had misjudged and mistreated him. His way of living was not attractive to sane, reasonable people, but if he chose to shut himself

off from the usual currents of human enjoyment he was the loser and it was his affair.

Ezra Dameron had long been content to lend money on mortgages, to buy and sell real estate and to invest in tax titles; but he had in recent years widened his field, through curious circumstances. He had held in his strong box for a decade several hundred shares of stock in a western railway company that had never paid any dividends. The property had been absorbed by a great system with the result that the market value of the stock doubled instantly. As a result Dameron's attitude toward the world of finance centered in Wall Street altered considerably. He became a close student of the stock list as printed in the daily newspapers. He procured copies of the annual financial statements of a number of railways and pored over them in his office. The tendency of prices was upward; political conditions, which he had always studied carefully, seemed favorable to a long-continued period of good times. He kept the stock he had, but bought more, chiefly among low-priced securities, buying outright through his bank. The stock in every case was bought in his own name as trustee; and he deposited it in his strong-box and watched the value of his holdings rise steadily.

He began to feel himself in touch with large matters. His ownership of this stock added fresh zest to life, and he experienced a thrill of pleasure as he contemplated his investments. He entered his transactions with scrupulous care in his account books; and his time, which had previously been given wholly to the care of real estate and mortgages, he began to divide, giving a large share of it to the study of the markets. He found that

he could learn the daily stock quotations in advance of their publication in the afternoon newspapers by visiting the offices of a broker, who provided a large room with comfortable seats for his patrons and chalked the quotations on a bulletin board. He was free to visit the place when he liked; no one appeared to know him and no questions were asked. He continued this course for a year with growing interest. His life had been singularly free from excitement; but here was a game that he could watch as a calm spectator and with no danger to himself. Then the newspapers began to be filled with stories of the great fortunes that were made daily in Wall Street. The railroads had never before been so prosperous; there was a wail all over the land because there were not cars enough to handle the country's business.

It was a great game, and Ezra Dameron watched the blackboard with increasing fascination, enjoying the gossip of the broker's office, where the other habitués learned to know him, and confided to him their successes. They were poor men who had not money with which to purchase stock outright, yet they, too, found it possible to take advantage of the general prosperity. The idea pleased Dameron; he construed it as an evidence of the Providence of God, who was dispensing riches to all the faithful. He gradually reasoned himself into the belief that it was foolish to purchase and pay for stocks in full when a mere memorandum of ownership, based on the identical property and the same market, would greatly multiply his increase. He knew from his own observations in the broker's office that it was an easy matter to make purchases on margins; he had witnessed thousands of such transactions at the cashier's window.

Nothing could be simpler; in no way could a dollar be invested to so good advantage.

He came slowly to the conclusion that it was absurd to buy shares outright when it was possible to gain all the advantage of a rising market by carrying a multiplied number of shares on margin. He argued himself into this belief gradually. He experienced the common misfortune of the beginner at games of chance; he was extremely successful. This he believed to be the result of his sagacity and shrewdness in studying the internal character of his investments, refusing to believe that he was profiting merely by a general upward tendency perceptible in every branch of trade.

At first he put aside only a small amount of money for use in speculation, but he increased this gradually,—almost unconsciously. He grew afraid to be seen so much in the broker's offices; he could no longer throw an air of inadvertence about his visits there, for he found himself spending whole days before the bulletin board. A number of his houses were placarded for rent, but the gambler's passion had entered into his blood. He had traveled little, but now the magnitude of the country's transportation interests struck him in a new light; he studied the maps of railways and pictured in his dreams the thousands of manufactories and the plains of corn and wheat in the West that were back of every share of stock in the great systems.

But it was best that no one should know at home that he was investing his money in these ways, and he next opened an account with a large brokerage firm in Chicago, and subscribed to a Chicago daily newspaper that he might the better keep in touch with the market. His

cunning in hiding his steps on the perilous sands of speculation kept pace with the growth of his passion for the game. He made deposits with the brokers in cash drawn from the Mariona National Bank and sent by express to Chicago. He even alternated his use of the express companies.

When Jack Balcomb went to see Dameron about the plot of ground known as the creek strip, the old man was poring over a crop bulletin. His callers either came to collect or to confess their inability to pay, and as Dameron had never seen Balcomb before, he concluded at once that the young man was a collector. People who came to pay him were not usually so well appareled.

Balcomb stood for a moment in the door of the ante-room, drawing the glove from his right hand.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Dameron. My name is Balcomb." He advanced and placed a visiting card on the dingy green cover of Dameron's desk.

Dameron picked up the card and inspected it without looking at his caller. Book agents often carried plain visiting cards and left their sample cases in the hall. Ezra Dameron classified Balcomb as belonging to their species.

"I have the honor to know your daughter slightly, Mr. Dameron."

"That is possible," said the old man, dryly, still not looking up.

"Yes, sir; I was fortunate enough to be associated with her in one of the Dramatic Club plays."

"Humph!" and Ezra Dameron's eyes wandered back to his papers. He was computing the possibility of a crop shortage, and Balcomb's visit was ill-timed.

"I have no time to-day, sir; I'm very busy. I don't care to buy anything," he said.

His eyes returned to the tables he had been studying. Heavy rains had injured the corn in Nebraska, and he was speculating as to the effect of this on the railways that traversed that region.

"Pardon me," said Balcomb, whose eyes had swept the contents of the bare room comprehensively, "but I didn't come to sell anything. I see that you are busy and I should like to make an appointment with you for some other time."

Dameron raised his eyes and looked Balcomb over carefully. Jack Balcomb was undeniably a presentable young man, as he stood with his head bent deferentially, holding his hat and glove in one hand. If he was not a collector or a book agent, he probably wished to borrow money. Just now Ezra Dameron had no money to lend.

"My time is much taken, but I have never found it profitable to defer interviews. What is it you want?"

A chair stood near Dameron's desk, but it was covered with papers, and he made no effort to clear it for his caller. It was, in fact, one of Dameron's rules never to ask callers to sit down. Most of his visitors came with tales of woe, and he had found that people in trouble are voluble.

"My business is serious," said Balcomb, imperturbably, "and I should not like to take it up when you are busy."

"We will take it up now or not at all."

The old man was still bent over the table with his pencil poised in his hand. His glasses were pinched

low down on his long thin nose, and he looked over them at Balcomb very coldly.

"I don't want you to be in haste in considering—"

"You needn't trouble yourself. There will be no delay whatever. It is my practice, sir, to pass on questions as they rise." And Dameron tapped the table impatiently with his pencil.

"Very well," said Balcomb, smiling amiably. "I wish to know whether you will put a price on that piece of ground you own on High Street near the creek. I have a description in my pocket, if you care to refresh your memory."

"I know the piece perfectly. It is not for sale."

"I understand that, Mr. Dameron. It is pretty well understood in Mariona that Mr. Dameron rarely sells real estate. That's quite in keeping with my own ideas."

Balcomb rested one of his highly polished shoes on a round of the chair and smiled agreeably at Ezra Dameron.

"You flatter me," said the old man, dryly. "May I ask who sent you here?"

"Certainly, sir. I represent no one but myself. I never employ agents. I prefer to do business at first hand."

"Then I'm sure your business is well cared for," said Dameron.

Balcomb grinned respectfully at the old man's irony.

"I am fairly prosperous," he said, and Dameron looked him over again. The market had been uncertain for several days. The bears had been making a raid, and he had lost some money,—not very much, to be sure,—but still the steady gains of several prosper-

ous weeks had been wiped out. But he was confident of a reaction. He had of late paid little attention to the property which Balcomb had mentioned, and his thoughts turned upon it.

"Have you ever been here before?"

"No, sir."

"What do you want with that property?"

"I'm not at liberty to state at present."

"Then you're not really your own master after all, but negotiating for other parties."

"Not at all. As I told you, I represent no one but myself. But I don't propose telling you what I expect to do with that ground; my ideas are worth something to me."

"You rather imply that you don't trust me;" and the old man smiled and drew his hand across his face.

"Not further," said Balcomb, pleasantly, "than I could throw an elephant by the tail."

The old man scrutinized Balcomb with new interest, drawing lines on a blotter with his pencil.

"You're insulting," he said, but without irritation.

"No," said Balcomb, "I'm just frank. I'm merely saying to you what everybody else thinks. I make a point of being frank. I've found that it pays."

"You're evidently a very observing young man. You don't consider that my reputation in the community is of the first order,—is that what you mean?" And the old man continued to make marks on the blotter.

"You've caught it exactly. I don't recall just now that I ever heard any one say a good word for you. You asked the question and I have answered you."

"You certainly are a frank young man;" and Dam-

eron brought the tips of his fingers together, and examined Jack Balcomb more critically. The promotor's bold air pleased him.

"What piece of property was it you mentioned?" he asked with a feigned air of forgetfulness.

"You have made a fair sketch of it on that blotter," said Balcomb, grinning. "That triangle is unmistakable,—that's the creek there on the uneven side."

Dameron looked down at the blotter over which his pencil had been traveling unconsciously. He had indeed sketched an outline of the plot of ground, and he looked up at Balcomb with a shrewd smile.

"You are a clever young man,—a very clever young man. I am glad to enjoy your acquaintance. You may go now."

He resettled his glasses on his nose and picked up his pencil. The interview had ceased to interest him, and he would sustain his dignity by dismissing Balcomb as though the young man were a school-boy.

Balcomb laughed and slapped his leg.

"Do you know, I like you! I think we're going to do some business together some day. They told me you were a terrible frost, and I guess you are too many for the most of them. Not many men know how to carry on a trade, but you have the right idea. Always turn a man down on a first interview; that's one of my own principles."

Balcomb drew on his glove, not in the least disturbed by Dameron's renewed absorption in his figures. He bent forward far enough to see that the old man was studying a statistical table. He knew the table well enough, because it was of a type that was circulated



Ezra Dameron

freely by a local broker, whose name was printed at the top of the sheet in red ink, and the sight of it and Dameron's deep interest in it pleased Balcomb immensely. He felt that he had made a capital beginning. He was not ready to buy the site for the Patoka Flats just yet, but there was no question in his mind but that he should have an opportunity to buy a little later on. He knew that when a man of Dameron's age and character begins to fail the failure is often very rapid. He smoothed his gloves carefully as he looked down on Dameron's figure drooping over the table, contemplating him with something of the satisfaction with which a young buzzard watches an old horse stumbling about a pasture and making ready to die.

"My address is printed on the card, if you should care to see me before I come back. Please don't do anything until you hear from me. I have that sentence printed on all my stationery!"

Dameron shook his head impatiently and continued to study his figures without looking up. But when he heard the outer door close and knew that Balcomb had gone he leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together in their familiar attitude of prayer; and he sat thus until dark, dreaming many dreams.

CHAPTER XXI

"I BELIEVE I'M IN LOVE"

Olive's trunks went to the farm with Zelda's. Mrs. Merriam had gone East to visit a sister, and Zelda settled Olive's plans immediately. Zelda's refusal to make the rounds of the eastern summer resorts with Mrs. Forrest caused that excellent woman an immense amount of trouble. She therefore demanded that her brother should accompany her, and he finally agreed to go. Rodney Merriam scolded Zelda roundly for refusing to go with them, and when she disclosed the fact that Olive was to spend the summer with her at the farm, he said things in his anger which he regretted when he had gone home to the solace of his old clothes, his slippers and his pipe.

Ezra Dameron was now so deeply absorbed in his speculations that he paid less and less heed to the details of his own household. He permitted Zelda to make the transfer from Merriam Street to the farm with few hints from himself; he no longer meddled with the marketing, and he rarely if ever admonished Polly as to the necessity for economy. He treated Olive with perfect courtesy, though Zelda's liking for her cousin had deprived him of the use of two thousand dollars; but in pleasing his daughter and preventing possible inquiry into her estate by her uncle, it had been worth what it cost. He knew,

too, that with a companion at the farm Zelda was more likely to be contented. His hours in the city were long and he needed all his time for thought,—for planning new moves and studying the intricacies of the great game. Its fascination grew on him. He fancied that he had become expert in detecting causes and effects; he believed his judgment to be infallible. He would make himself rich, rich; and he would pay Zelda generously for the use of the trustee's fund that he was using; yes, and she in due time should have all that he made for himself,—and it should be a greater fortune than her own.

Ezra Dameron had bought The Beeches at foreclosure sale, several years before, at half its value. An interurban car-line now passed within a short distance of the gate and made the farm readily accessible from the city, so that the investment had already been justified. The cottage was not visible from the highway, but was reached by an irregular private road, that wound in and out among beeches and maples to the front door. At the side of the cottage a steep declivity ran down suddenly to a brook that murmured pleasantly. The house had been placed with a nice regard for the trees of the original woodland, which crowded up close on every hand. Beyond the ravine, and reached by a rustic bridge, were the barns and cribs that marked the practical farming character of the estate.

Zelda and Olive sat on the veranda and looked out upon an afternoon landscape sweet with mid-June. They had just swung a hammock between two posts in a shady corner, and Olive was testing its comfort and security, swinging herself back and forth with the tips of her boots touching the floor.

"Who'll come?" asked Olive.

"There's a squirrel now," said Zelda. "And that woodpecker up there declines to be ignored."

"I wasn't referring to the fauna, flora and reptilia of the place. I was speaking of human beings."

"Oh! I suppose Uncle Rodney will come. Aunt Julia doesn't drag him away for a while. Aunt Julia may come, though it isn't likely. Driving over dusty Hoosier roads doesn't exactly suit her."

"I wasn't speaking of relatives, either," said Olive, lifting her eyes to the blasted sycamore, where the woodpecker was at his carpentry.

"Mr. J. Arthur Balcomb? You'd better get rid of J. Arthur before that little army man catches him in your society. Some very tragic thing will happen if you are not careful."

"I should hate to have Mr. Balcomb killed. I love to hear him talk."

"You'd still hear him if he were dead,—death could never stop a flow like his," observed Zelda.

"I didn't have him in mind; but I suppose he's likely to appear. You'll suffer him to sit on the veranda occasionally, I hope. I shouldn't dare ask him into the house."

"Our country silver is only plated," said Zelda. "I'm not afraid."

"That's unkind of you. I fancy Mr. Leighton never stole any spoons in his life."

"I suppose I ought to blush and seem embarrassed; but I shall disappoint you," said Zelda, turning away, however, and looking at the blue sky beyond the tree-tops. "I'm not at all sure that Mr. Leighton will favor us. I

don't remember that I asked him to come. He's always very busy; industry's one of his chief merits."

"Poor young man! I suppose he'll die of overwork—or of unrequited love," suggested Olive.

"He isn't in love with me, if that's what you're hinting at so darkly. He thinks he has to be polite to me on Uncle Rodney's account."

"Of course, we all know that Uncle Rodney would like to be the good uncle of the story-books and make a match between you. Morris Leighton is his protégé. He wants you and Mr. Leighton to spend his money when he's gone. Everybody knows that."

"I hope everybody does know it; the more people you disappoint the more fun! He's a good young man."

"Zelda Dameron, why do you speak of goodness and of good people in that way? It's grown noticeable. One would think you the wickedest person in the world to hear you talk. And yet you are the kindest girl—the best-hearted person that I ever knew!"

Olive continued to swing herself back and forth. There were many things about Zelda that mystified her; but she had asked a question that had been often in her mind and heart.

"One might think, to hear you talk, that you really would like to turn all the beatitudes upside down," she added.

"I'm queer; I'm a Merriam; that's what's the matter with me. I suppose all the sins that you might have had, and all the rest of the family, are concentrated in me."

Zelda was looking out through the woodland, with her eyes away from Olive, and she spoke dolefully. Her cousin's question had surprised her. She wished no one

to know how her heart revolted against the goodness of the world ; she must be very careful lest some one should guess her secret.

She welcomed just then the sight of her uncle's figure approaching through the trees.

"Your prayer is answered, Olive. Some one is coming and it looks very much like our uncle." She waved her hand to the old gentleman, who was beating his way with his stick through the underbrush.

Zelda placed a chair for him.

"Why didn't you tell me about that jungle? When you said it was a quarter of a mile from the interurban, I didn't know you were joking. And bad luck to your interurban cars, anyhow."

They offered him things to eat, drink and smoke.

"I should like a little whisky and water. I suppose you have the water."

"And we have the whisky, too." Zelda brought a decanter and a glass and watched him expectantly as he poured a quantity. Olive, too, leaned forward with a twinkle in her eyes.

Merriam smelled the whisky carefully ; then he held up the glass and tipped it, noting the thickness of the reddish fluid, which left a distinct trace on the side of the tumbler. He raised it to his lips and sipped it critically, while his eyes looked far off into some unknown haven of Arcadia. He next poured a drop into his palm and watched it evaporate, saying nothing. Then he drained the glass and placed it on the flat arm of the chair.

"How did you do it?" he demanded.

"Do what, *mon oncle*?"

"Get that whisky?"

"Why, it's just any old medicine-chest stuff, isn't it?"

"Not much it isn't! Where did you get it?"

"Grocery or drug store, possibly."

"Where did you get it?"—his tone was fierce now.

Zelda and Olive exchanged glances and lifted their voices in laughter.

"Somebody's been in my cellar. There's no mistaking that stuff!"

"I've lost a bet," said Zelda, mournfully. "I'm almost afraid to tell you that I made a bet against you."

"Of course you would bet against me."

"It was with Mr. Leighton. I said it was all bosh about your being able to tell; that it was all alike, and all very disagreeable, and that nobody really knew. He said you kept some of your favorite tippie, that some man in Kentucky gave you, at the club. So he brought a bottle out here for us to test you with. The least you can do is to pay my bet for me. I don't believe we stipulated what I should give him."

"I'll fix that. I'll give him a bottle of this unpurchasable stuff. He deserves it for his loyalty."

"But," said Zelda, "he couldn't use it! He's so very good. Really good and proper people like Mr. Leighton never touch whisky."

"Zee, don't be silly. Olive Merriam, your cousin is given to foolishness. I hope you can show her the light of a little sweet reasonableness. She's getting worse."

"It's wonderful how well she hides her real feelings," said Olive. "But here comes that little soldier on horseback."

Pollock was riding up to the house on his nimble-footed sorrel. He had been to the city and was returning

to the quarters he had established in a dwelling on one of the farms lately bought by the government for the new post, which lay only a few miles from The Beeches.

He swung to the ground and advanced to the railing with the rein in his left hand, his gray fedora hat in his right, and saluted them all.

Rodney Merriam sat forward in his chair, bending his keen gaze on Pollock. The girls had already nodded to the officer most amiably, but Rodney frowned and shook his head. Many things had irritated him to-day. The walk from the car to the Dameron house had tired him; he was not wholly pleased to find Olive Merriam installed with Zelda at the farm-house, though he knew that he should find her there; and Zelda's slighting remark about Morris Leighton had added to his annoyance. And now Pollock, who had been in Washington for several months, had reappeared in Mariona.

"How dare he come here?" asked Rodney, half-aloud.

"It doesn't take a very big dare, for we have expressly asked him," answered Zelda, as Pollock walked around to the veranda steps.

"He's a little fellow," reflected Merriam, under his breath. Pollock came up the steps, shaking hands with Zelda and Olive. As the young man turned toward him with hand outstretched, Rodney Merriam feigned not to see it, but bowed stiffly. Pollock brought himself a chair from the hall, as Zelda bade him, and sat down; but Rodney Merriam remained standing.

"Zee, I beg of you take good care of that bottle. You may tell Morris when you see him that I'll pay the bet for you. But don't you bet against your uncle again."

His manner irritated Zelda. She had never seen him

discourteous to any one before, and his refusal to take Captain Pollock's hand was uncalled-for; and it was not to be excused on the ground of her uncle's age, for he was in full possession of his faculties. She did not know whether he was trying to hint to her that whisky was not to be passed to a young man who called on her, or whether he had wished merely to suggest to Captain Pollock the fact that Morris Leighton was on intimate terms in the household. The maid came and carried the decanter into the house.

"You may be sure that your precious fluid will not be disturbed," said Zelda, coldly.

"There ought to be a car in fifteen minutes, so I'll go as I came."

"Pardon me, sir," said Pollock, rising, "I should be delighted if you would ride my horse in. I should like to know what you think of him; and I'll call for him tomorrow."

"Thank you, but it's too hot to ride. I much prefer the car, sir," replied Rodney, stiffly, without looking at the young man.

The situation was not comfortable. Pollock flushed slightly and the young women tried to hide their surprise under a cheery farewell to their uncle. Zelda hesitated a moment, then ran down the steps and walked with him along the winding road and out of sight of the veranda.

"I suppose I'll miss the car," observed Merriam, irascibly.

"You ought to miss it! Why did you treat Captain Pollock so shabbily?"

"I don't like him," replied Merriam, grimly. "I

warned you last winter not to have anything to do with him. You must drop him. Do you understand?"

"I certainly do not. I'm sorry you don't like him; I like him—better than anybody."

"Then stop it right now; stop it; stop it!" And the old gentleman beat the road with his stick until the gravel flew.

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind," said Zelda. "I'll even tell you a secret," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. "I believe I'm in love with him! You'll miss your car if you don't hurry. If you had been good, I should have driven you in. Good-by."

CHAPTER XXII

RODNEY MERRIAM EXPLAINS

Captain Frank Pollock was, as many people had said at different times and in divers places, a little fellow; but there was a good deal of decision in his make-up. He walked to Rodney Merriam's house the next afternoon with an exaggeration of his usual alert dignity.

The Japanese boy said that Mr. Merriam was at home, and he took Pollock's card and asked him to have a seat in the library. Pollock stood, however, in the middle of the room, with a general effect of parade rest, holding his hat and stick.

It is usually possible to tell, when you have rung a door-bell, just what happens after you have been announced. Some one looks at your card and smiles or frowns, or possibly mutters surprise, agreeable or otherwise. In the case of a woman, there must be an interval of self-inspection in the mirror,—an adjustment of ribbons, a stroke or two with comb and brush. In the case of a man, he may, if the demand upon him warrant it, smooth his hair, adjust his tie, and put aside his slippers and dressing-gown. And these things, if you are waiting below, you dramatize for yourself, just as though you had followed your card to its destination.

Rodney Merriam was lying on a wide couch in his upstairs sitting-room when Pollock's card was brought to

him. He held before him the London *Times*, a journal which he read through conscientiously every day; but he was not particularly interested in the Eastern question just now. He was brooding over Zelda's affairs, which did not please him at all; and the prospect of making the rounds of eastern summer resorts with Mrs. Forrest did not cheer him by anticipation. When the boy appeared at the door, Merriam said, without looking up:

"If it's Mr. Leighton, I'll see him here."

"No, sir; it's another gentleman," said the boy, producing Pollock's card.

Merriam raised his head and read the card; he then took his pipe out of his mouth and sat up.

"Put out my coat and shoes, and tell the gentleman I'll be down in a moment."

When the boy had gone he went to a bronze jar that stood on the mantel and knocked his ashes into it. He put on a pair of low shoes and a blue serge sack-coat, and before he left the room he stood on the threshold a moment, thinking deeply.

"I'll be damned," he muttered, in the agreeable tone in which he always swore to himself; and then he went down stairs.

"Good afternoon, Captain Pollock," he said courteously, taking a step toward his caller, but Pollock stood perfectly rigid and did not move.

"Please be seated, Captain. I am quite at your service."

Merriam stood by his desk, his hand resting upon it.

"Mr. Merriam," began Pollock, "I was introduced to you by a gentleman in your own club several months ago."

"That is correct."

"I have met you a number of times since,—I needn't specify. Within a week you have refused to speak to me at the club; and yesterday, at Mr. Dameron's house, you acted toward me in an extraordinary way, to say the least."

Merriam nodded affirmatively.

"As I am likely to meet you, here and there, at the club, perhaps at houses of your friends, I have taken the liberty of asking you what I have done to offend you. I resent being cut before my friends by a man whom they have a right to assume I know."

"I fear that you exaggerate, Captain Pollock. I doubt whether cutting a man's acquaintance can be construed as an insult."

"That is a matter of opinion, sir. I choose to take it that you have deliberately snubbed me, and, among other people, before your nieces, Miss Dameron and Miss Merriam, only yesterday afternoon. If I am not fit to enjoy your acquaintance, I am not a fit person for them to know. I have come, sir, to ask an explanation of your singular conduct. I am not in the habit of being treated in this fashion by a man of any age."

His effort to be respectful in his anger showed a quality of character that touched the old man, who looked at the erect, uncompromising figure with liking in spite of himself.

"I am not in the habit of giving reasons for things I do, Captain Pollock, and it would pain me very much to be obliged to explain why I may have seemed to treat you with discourtesy. I beg of you to dismiss the matter as one of the aberrations, let us say, of old age. I am con-

siderably your senior. My liking you or not liking you is not an important matter,—unless, well, it is conceivable that some situation might arise in which it might become important.”

“As a mysterious character in this community you may act as you please with your townspeople, but you can’t do it with me! I’m not a child, and I don’t propose to be treated like a baby. I want to know what I have done to offend you.”

Pollock jerked out his words fiercely and glared at Merriam, who regarded him with grave patience.

“You will pardon me if I sit down, Captain Pollock,”—and Merriam dragged a chair forward and sank into it, while Pollock remained standing and glaring at him. “Nothing can be gained from me by bluster. You are in my house, by your own invitation!”

“Quite so! There was no other way of seeing you. I did not care to stop you in the street, and you have already made it impossible for me to speak to you in your club. I hope this explanation is satisfactory.”

“Entirely. Pray have a seat, to oblige me.”

Pollock sat down reluctantly. The house was very quiet; it was a hot day and the air in the room was tense.

“Captain,” said the old gentleman, quietly, with his black eyes resting kindly on the visitor, “I regret very much that you have come to me with this question—”

“I’ve no doubt you do, sir,—” began Pollock, hotly.

“—because,” Merriam continued, paying no heed to the interruption, “you have never in the world done anything to offend me,—not in the slightest. As far as I know, you are a gentleman beyond any question, and worthy of the highest consideration in all places.”

"Then, sir,—"

"Please wait! I regret very much that I should have been led by a feeling, which I should prefer not to explain, into treating you discourteously. A man of my age should have better control of himself,—better manners, if you will."

He raised his right hand and stared at the palm quite unconsciously. It was a habit of his when thoughtful.

Pollock felt his anger cooling under the old gentleman's composure. There was something fine in it, that impressed him in spite of himself. Moreover, his curiosity was piqued. He had expected to call, demand an explanation and retire, after giving the old gentleman in Seminary Square a piece of his mind. He had not the slightest idea that Rodney Merriam had any particular reason for slighting him; though it had occurred to him that as a self-appointed guardian of Zelda Dameron, Merriam might have seen in him a possible suitor and sought to eliminate him from the possibilities by treating him contemptuously.

Merriam had finished inspecting his hand and he dropped it upon his knee and met Pollock's eyes again.

"I should very much prefer to dismiss this matter. As I have said, I have no grievance against you personally. I am perfectly willing to apologize and to meet you in a friendly spirit. To repeat, I have let an old prejudice get the better of my good sense. I trust this will be satisfactory."

"Not a bit of it, sir," snapped Pollock, with fresh asperity. "If you haven't anything against me personally, I should like to know what you are hinting about so darkly. Your air is insufferable! We may as

well go to the bottom of this now and here. I'm not a child, as I have said before!"

Merriam smiled in a perplexed sort of way. He had spoken the truth. He was heartily sorry for what he had done. Pollock's presence in town had annoyed him greatly; and the young man's friendly relations with Zelda had really angered and distressed him. But here sat Pollock before him, in his own house, demanding an explanation to which he was entitled by all the rules that govern social intercourse. Merriam was uncomfortable, and he disliked being made uncomfortable. He had not often been cornered; and Pollock's demand threw him back again into the past in which he had of late been living all too much.

"If I should refuse to talk to you—"

"You shan't do anything of the kind! Your evasion and mysterious hints are all of a piece with your whole attitude toward me, and I am not going to stand it!"

Merriam bowed his head and was thoughtful for a moment. Then he raised his eyes again. Pollock had risen and taken a quick turn across the floor; but he sat down again, when he saw that Merriam was about to speak.

"My dear sir, I trust that it will be quite enough to say that your name is one that is associated with an unpleasant incident in my life. It doesn't concern you at all. It was a matter between your father and myself."

Pollock was on his feet again with a leap.

"You are mad or a fool! What in the devil are you driving at? I don't suppose you ever saw my father in your life. He's been dead fifteen years!"

"Quite that," said the colonel. "I could, from my papers here, give you the exact date if it were important. Your father and I were somewhat acquainted,—during the Civil War,—and the recollection is unpleasant. I beg you to drop the matter. I am an old man—"

"You are mad, you are perfectly mad!" declared Pollock, his voice ringing out in the room. "You not only insult me, but you drag my dead father into this romance. If you didn't like my seeing your nieces, why in the devil didn't you say so in a straight manly way and not invent a lot of fanciful tales to back you up? It's wholly possible that you knew my father. He was a man of honor! His name is a good one in his own state. I am proud of it. And it ought to count something for me that I am an officer in the army that he fought against. I would warn you, sir, that my father's name is a sacred thing to me!"

"I'm sure that is so, Captain Pollock. And that's why I beg of you to accept an apology and let me alone."

The old man spoke very earnestly, and with an undoubted sincerity; but Pollock blazed at him furiously:

"Unless you want to be branded as a liar, you will tell me what this is before I leave the house. There's a place where a man's age ceases to be his protection."

Then Rodney Merriam's manner changed.

"Please be seated, and don't, I beg of you, alarm the servants. I'm going to tell you what this trouble is, and before I begin I want to apologize for doing so. And when I finish,—it will take but a moment,—I'm going to apologize to you again. I am sixty years old, Captain Pollock, and I don't remember that I ever

apologized to any one before. The most comfortable thing a man can have is a bad memory. My trouble is that I never forget anything. It was after we had captured Donelson. I had been sent back here to Mari-ona, my home, on an errand to the governor, who was having a devil of a time of it, fighting Copperheads and getting troops into the field. The old railway station down here was a horrible sight the night the Donelson prisoners were brought in. Many of them were sick and they were taken from the cars and laid out on the floor until they could be carried to Camp Burnside, which had been turned into a rebel prison.

"I was down looking over the prisoners when I struck a little chap who was badly used up. He said his name was Hamilton. He was a Confederate private, but evidently a man of education and breeding. He was on fire with fever, and the whole situation at the station was so forbidding that I got permission to take him to my father's house. That's where Mr. Dameron lives now. The officer in charge of the prisoners was a friend of mine; and when he let me take Hamilton away, as a favor, I gave my personal pledge that he should be delivered at the prison whenever they wanted him.

"At home we took a fancy to Hamilton. He was up and about the house in a couple of weeks. I gave him some of my civilian clothes so that he could go down into town. There seemed to be nothing unusual about him. He was a forlorn young fellow,—a prisoner, far from home, and my father and the rest of them at the house liked him. We used to call him our little rebel.

"Then one day there was the devil to pay. My friend,

the commandant at the prison, sent a guard to the house to arrest Hamilton, but he had disappeared. We learned then that he was all kinds of a bad lot,—a dangerous spy who had been captured at Donelson purely by accident, but he had turned his capture and illness to good advantage. Mariona was the headquarters of a daring band of southern sympathizers, and Hamilton had established lines of communication with the leaders. There was a scheme afoot to assassinate the governor, and he was to have done the act. His line of retreat to the Ohio had been carefully arranged.

“Hamilton had warning of the discovery of the plot,—there was a Copperhead behind every loyal man here in those days—and got away safely. But you can see that, having vouched for him and harbored him, I was put in a nice position with the authorities. I offered to submit to arrest, but they wouldn’t have it. The governor sent for me and after giving me a good drubbing—he had known me all my life and rubbed it in hard—he told me to go and find Hamilton.

“I was captain of artillery and my chances of advancement were good; but I resigned my commission and spent a year looking for him. He became notorious as a spy, who slipped in and out of our lines with astounding daring. He found out that I was after him, and we used to exchange compliments at long range. As I think of it now I got a good deal of fun out of the chase, and”—the old man smiled—“I fancy the other fellow did, too.

“The story is long and it wouldn’t interest you. I never caught him. I went once into a circle of men in the Galt House at Louisville where he sat. I thought

I had him sure, but he jumped up and bolted, I following. We had a mad run for it there in the street, but he got away. He gave me this"—and Merriam threw up his hands. The sleeve and cuff slipped back from his right arm, showing an old bullet scar on the wrist; and the old gentleman eyed the spot for a moment reflectively.

"He gave me that," he said, and smiled. "Hamilton's real name was Pollock—your father;"—and Merriam bent his keen gaze on the young man before him. "I think I may be pardoned for not caring greatly for the family. That business ruined my career in the army. There are a great many things that might have been different, if I hadn't seriously compromised myself in that matter. The contemptible thing was the abuse of hospitality and confidence. I probably saved the man's life; and he betrayed us all in the most infamous fashion possible."

Pollock rose abruptly. He had listened with a puzzled look on his face to Rodney Merriam's recital. He laughed now, the nervous laugh of relief.

"This man was a spy, sent out by the Confederate War Department on special errands for the Confederate president. Is that right?" he asked.

"That is correct. He became one of the best known spies in the South. I have no objection to him on that account. But he served me a scurvy trick,—I ought to forget it, I suppose, but, as I tell you, I'm an old man, and I look backward a good deal. Your father served me a nasty trick and your presence here has reminded me of it very disagreeably."

"That man, Mr. Merriam, was no more my father than you are."

"I can hardly be mistaken. Your father was a Confederate officer,—he was a Tennessee man—"

"He was all that, sir. He was an engineer on duty at Richmond throughout the war and was never a scout or spy in his life. If you had been as careful as you pretend to be in looking up his record you would have found that out."

"But the name? It is your name."

The old man was greatly annoyed and perplexed, and he rose now slowly and stood facing the young officer.

"Frank Pollock, the spy, was a remote cousin of my father's. I don't believe father ever had any acquaintance with him. I was named for another connection of the family, who wasn't a Pollock at all. Your man Pollock got into a lot of scrapes after the war. I'll even grant you that he wasn't quite reputable. If you wish to verify what I say I'll refer you to a hundred men in Knoxville,—Richmond,—Memphis,—Atlanta, who knew my father and who knew of this other man, too. Do you want my references?"

He was a little fellow and he was angry; but he was a gentleman, too, and, seeing that Rodney Merriam was really surprised, he relented toward the old soldier, who had thrust his hands into the side pockets of his coat, looking as foolish as it is possible for a fine old gentleman to look.

"Captain Pollock," he blurted out suddenly, "I haven't a doubt that you are telling the truth. I don't care whose son you are, I like you anyhow!" And then snatching his hands from his pockets he held them out to Pollock, demanding with a gruff kindness, "Will you shake hands with me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Merriam!"

A few hours later the usual crowd lounged in the smoking-room of the Tippecanoe Club. Pollock had just finished telling a story when Rodney Merriam appeared in the doorway. The old gentleman advanced upon the little group, returning their greetings and thanking them all for the proffer of their seats.

"Gentlemen," he said, standing by his chair, "I wish to make you an explanation. Owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding, due wholly to my own stupidity, I recently showed Captain Pollock a slight in this club. I wish to make the amplest possible expiation,—"

"This is wholly unnecessary," exclaimed Pollock, rising. "This is wholly uncalled for, Mr. Merriam."

"I wish to say before all of you," Merriam continued, "that I was wholly in the wrong, and that Captain Pollock is a gentleman, who is an honor to his friends and to his profession."

He put out his hand and Pollock grasped it.

"Leighton," said Merriam, "you are nearest the bell. Give it a punch, won't you?"

And be it said for the Tippecanoe Club, that no one of the ten men present ever spoke of this incident outside its doors. It was no one's affair what happened between Rodney Merriam and the army officer; it sufficed that an old man had made the *amende honorable* in a way that impressed ten young men deeply.

And the next day, in the same spirit of scrupulous honor, Rodney Merriam sought his nieces at The Beeches and made his peace with them.

CHAPTER XXIII

BRIGHTER VISTAS

It was now full summer, and when it is hot in Mari-ona it is very hot indeed. The old locusts in the court back of the law offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr were green again and venturesome robins paused there now and then to challenge Opinion and Precedent. There was not much for unattached young men to do when their day's work was done. The roof garden of the Hamilton Club offered itself to those who cared for that sort of thing, or were zealous in the eternal politics of the place, from which, save for the roof garden, there was no escape. Or, a man with an evening on his hands might sit on the lawn about the Tippecanoe Club, or, better still, with a crony or two, on the balcony that opened from the second story, where trees shut you in with the stars, and the music, not of spheres, but of the mechanical piano in the flat next door. It was possible to obtain there a mint julep compounded under the direction of an alumnus of the University of Virginia,—a julep that was happily calculated to lift the smothered, withered spirit beyond the stars to undiscovered ports of Heaven. You were at perfect liberty to whisper at the Tippecanoe, as you might not at the Hamilton, the name of Jefferson;

or you might quote Robert Browning or Richard Cobden without subjecting yourself to fine or imprisonment.

There was the Country Club, another refuge, where college boys sang in dark corners of the veranda, after a hard day of golf or tennis; or danced the two-step with sun-browned summer girls. But the Country Club did not appeal to Morris just now. Zelda did not frequent the club, and the pretty, gray-eyed golf-champion with whom in other summers he had played many a round, bowed a little superciliously now when she passed him in her electric runabout. She did not salute him with a jangle of the gong as had been her pleasant habit in the genial days of their comradeship. Nor did the bands in the glittering beer-gardens tempt him; for there is something not wholly edifying in the passing spectacle of every one and every one's cook.

Morris Leighton, lingering long after office hours in the dingy old library, found the robin's mournful vespere note solacing. None of the possible midsummer night diversions appealed to him; he would not even go up to the Tippecanoe Club for dinner lest some one should break in upon what he felt to be his mood. He was reveling in that state of mind in which the young rather enjoy being melancholy. Zelda Dameron snubbed him persistently—consistently; and Morris was just now persuading himself that there was nothing left for him but to lose himself in his work. This is always an interesting stage, at which a young man's fancy, interrupted in its flights elsewhere, lightly turns to thoughts of labor; and Morris was picturing to himself a long and successful, though austere, life, in which one face and one voice should haunt him. He was engaged in

this sort of agreeable speculation when Mr. Carr, who had been attending a conference of railroad officials at one of the hotels, came in unexpectedly, and found his chief clerk engaged in the profitable pastime of reading decisions of the highest courts in the land without the slightest notion of what they were about.

"That you, Morris? I thought every one had gone. I want that English decision you had yesterday in the Transcontinental case."

"It's here on the table," said Morris.

He lighted the gas in the brackets on the wall—they were old and had lost their pristine shine—and when the jets were lighted they spurted out queer shapes of flame, in the absurd manner of decrepit gas-fixtures.

"Thanks, Morris, I'll take the book home with me. I'm not sure but that we should lay particular stress on that case."

"It's certainly a strong one."

Carr pushed his panama hat back from his forehead and sat down and read the page that Morris indicated.

"That's it! Those old chaps over there still know some law, don't they?"

He closed the book and drew his hand across the back of it in a way that was habitual. He liked a book,—you knew it from the way he picked one up and handled it. Students in the offices of Knight, Kittredge and Carr who threw books about or left them open, face down, were not likely to stay long.

"Judge Armstrong of the Appellate Court said a pleasant word to me about your argument in the Mayberry case yesterday."

"That's cheering. I hope he'll decide our way."

"There's no use in worrying about that. He said yours was one of the best oral arguments he had ever heard. He asked you some questions, didn't he?"

Carr looked at Morris with the twinkle in his brown eyes that was his only outward manifestation of mirth.

"He did, indeed. He stopped me when I reached my most telling point, and asked me whether our supreme court hadn't reversed itself in a decision I was citing. I knew it hadn't and answered him pretty promptly,—perhaps I was too cocky about it."

"Not a bit of it! He would like that. He was feeling you to see how much confidence you had in your case. He belongs to the old school of lawyers, who believe in making every case you take the passion of your life. You evidently made a good impression. It pleased me very much to have him speak to me about you."

"Thank you."

It was not often that Michael Carr's praise was as direct as this.

"You will have been here four years the first of July."

"Yes,—thanks to your tolerance."

"You are the best clerk we ever had in the office, Morris. You are a good lawyer,—you are a lawyer after my own heart. I'll have a hard time finding a clerk to take your place. Do you understand?"

Morris did not understand. The idea of losing his salary as clerk was not cheering.

"I'm going to check up," said the old gentleman, settling back in his chair. "I'm sixty-four years old. I haven't had any substantial vacation worth mentioning for twenty years. I'm getting to a time of life

where a man has to think about the end of his days. Our old sign over the entrance has fallen down, and I take it as a hint that we need a new one. I have had a sentiment about keeping the name of the old firm; but it's misleading to the new generation. I'm tired of the people that come in here and ask for the dead members. It's hardly fair to subject their memories to that kind of treatment. We must drop the old name."

"I should hate to see it go," said Morris. "I've always been particularly proud to answer for the firm at roll-call on rule mornings."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it. You never saw Knight or Kittredge, did you? I'm sure you didn't. They were great men. There are no men like them at our bar." And Michael Carr drew his hand gently across the book that lay in his lap, and was silent for a moment.

"Do you think you want to live here, Morris? Are you satisfied with the town?"

"It's the only one I know. I think a man's chances are as good here as anywhere."

"I think so, too," said Carr, reflectively. "I have had it in mind for some time to make you a full partner, changing the name to Carr and Leighton,—if you are agreeable. Don't thank me; it's purely selfish. You have been virtually a partner for a year. At this bar a law clerk doesn't usually do the things that I have set you to doing. I've been glad of your help, and it will add to your influence with the courts to get away from the clerkship; and in the end that helps me."

"The clerkship has been a great thing for me; I am

in no mood for spurning it." Morris's heart was beating uncomfortably fast. He had never expected this. The best he had hoped for was a partnership with some young man at the bar. It was wholly like Michael Carr, though, to declare his intention in this way. The time and place seemed fitting. Morris loved the dim old rooms. He has a better office now,—for the old building has vanished, and the law library that was assembled through so many years by Knight, Kittredge and Carr is now established on the top floor of a ten-story building, where there are electric lights and steam heat.

"You don't have to thank me for anything, Morris. If you must express a little gratitude, give it all to Rodney Merriam. It was he that brought you to me. I'll have to thank him on my own account."

"You are the best friend any young man ever had," said Morris, feelingly.

"I prefer not to say anything about this change until the first of July. I'm going abroad then. Mrs. Carr has planned an extensive trip. I've never been over there and I suppose I may as well see it all at once, as we Americans get the credit for doing. We shall go to England and Scotland first, and then work our way south with the season. I'm going to leave you a full measure of work to do while I'm gone."

"Some of your clients will object. I should hate to see you losing business on my account."

"We can afford to lose a few and still have enough. I have a few clients that I shouldn't mind losing. Old friends, many of them, who don't want legal advice as much as friendly counsel."

"There are some of them that you have to be pretty patient with."

"Yes; there is Ezra Dameron. His business is worth little if anything. He's always afraid some one will get the advantage of him. I don't believe he trusts even me."

"He's a picturesque client, but not profitable, I imagine."

"No; he's not profitable. But I've always done whatever he had to do. He's a poor lot, Ezra Dameron. I suppose Mr. Merriam never speaks of him to you?"

"Never a word."

"That's quite characteristic. He hates him like poison, but he has never intimated as much to me. The Merriams have been at outs with one another for years. I believe the trouble began when Ezra Dameron married Margaret Merriam. They were opposed to it."

"He looks and acts the part of the traditional stage miser. His hammer and nails are part of his make-up."

"He's not attractive, to say the least. The only good thing I know about him is that his daughter stands by him. We all supposed that of course she would quit him after a few months; but she seems to be a Merriam. They are the real thing. Her mother stood by Ezra to the very last. She never let the family know if she suffered. She was a beautiful woman. She carried herself with a royal air. You don't remember her?"

"No, I never saw her. I've seen a portrait of her at Mr. Merriam's. Her daughter must be very like her."

"Yes; they are very like. But there's a difference; I haven't made out what it is. I think Mrs. Dameron hadn't quite the same spirit; there was a heart-breaking resignation in her. It got into her face as she grew older; but the girl hasn't it."

The talk drifted into a channel that Carr had not premeditated, but its direction suited his mood and the hour and place. He had thrown one short leg over the other and rested at ease in spite of the fact that it was now past his dinner hour.

"Mrs. Dameron's will caused a good deal of wonder and gossip when she died. She had deliberately chosen to carry her faith in her husband beyond the grave. You've seen the will?"

"Yes; the law students here make a study of it."

"As an example of what a will oughtn't to be? Well; it was all regular enough. I prepared it myself. It's sound enough legally; but foolish otherwise. She wished to make it quite clear that she trusted her husband. She had a quixotic idea that, in turning over all her property to him for the use of their daughter, she was putting a prop under him to make him stand. He ought to have a pretty good property to turn over to her at the termination of the trust. That comes,—let me see,—that comes on Zelda's twenty-first birthday,—I think it's next fall sometime. I suppose you don't happen to know when Miss Dameron's birthday comes?"

Michael Carr's eyes twinkled, and he looked at Leighton with the smile the world has for a suspected lover.

"No," said Leighton, laughing, "I don't know."

"Well," said Michael Carr, rising and thrusting the book under his arm, "I hope you may know one of these days,—if you want to. Mrs. Carr and I are both interested in seeing you settled. My wife takes a good deal of stock in you,—not to say that I don't! And we have decided that this would be a happy arrangement.

The father-in-law would leave a good deal to be desired; but that wouldn't be a consideration."

"I like the idea," said Leighton; "but you've set the mark too high."

"Never give up the ship, young man. Demurrers are not necessarily fatal."

"I didn't say that I'd filed my petition yet," said Morris.

"Better not wait too long,—or you may lose jurisdiction. And there's always a statute of limitations that operates in such matter. Are you going home to dinner with me?"

"No, thank you; I can't. I wish I could make you understand how much I appreciate your kindness to me. It isn't that I've learned some law,—it's the countless other things that you have done for me since I came here."

The old gentleman had walked to the door to get away from Morris's thanks, but he turned, with his rare smile.

"Are you keeping up your Horace? An ode once a day! I haven't missed mine for forty years. There's that particularly delightful one—the sixteenth—I recommend it to you,—the daughter more charming than her charming mother. A word to the wise! Good night, my boy!"

When Morris heard the outer door close he sat down and thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and indulged in dreams. He made a practice of writing once a week to his mother, and he wrote her a letter now, telling her of his stroke of fortune. "It is almost too good to be true," the letter ran. "I'm twenty-six years old, and I'm to be the partner of the best lawyer in the

state, something that I never expected. I know you will be glad. I only regret that father isn't here to rejoice with us."

He left the office with a quick step and a light heart, and walked to the post-office to mail his letter. He had known many lonely hours since moving to Mariona. He glanced up and down Jefferson Street as he crossed it. The lights, the noisy trolley cars, the great illuminated signs had all stood to him for loneliness; but he noted them to-night with a different spirit. He had been for five years an unimportant member of the community, winning respect from many; working hard, but enjoying his labor, and he felt a new courage. He had received a high mark of favor from the first lawyer at the Mariona bar; his name was to be linked with that of an historic law firm, and with a new elasticity of spirit he trod the familiar path from the old office to the federal building, where the United States Court sat. He wondered what his friend, the clerk of the court, would say when he heard of the new partnership; and the pleasant thought of the firm name of Carr and Leighton as it would appear in the court records caused Morris to parley chaffingly with a belated newsboy who sold him a paper at the post-office door.

He carried the paper to a table in a hotel restaurant where he sometimes got his meals, and opened it to the interurban time-table. It was seven o'clock. He could eat his supper, go to his rooms to change his clothes, and reach the Damerons' by half-past eight. His mood of depression passed, but there still lingered in his heart the sense of longing, the need for sympathy, that an honest, clean love brings to the heart of a man.

CHAPTER XXIV

ONLY ABOUT DREAMS

The wide windows of the heavy interurban car were open and the air of the summer night beat in gratefully upon him. Morris felt increasingly at peace with himself and all the world. His thoughts leaped agilely from peak to peak of possibility and achievement. He would be a lawyer; he would continue, as he had begun, a serious student of his profession. And there was Zelda! The thought of her was very sweet,—it had never been so sweet as it was to-night, and her name repeated itself over and over again in his memory. There was no vista of the future through which he did not see her. In all the world there was no one like her,—no one comparable to her. He recited his lover's alphabet of her charms and graces—the deep melody of her voice, the baffling mystery of her dark eyes; her ease of speech and grace of manner; the slender fingers of her eloquent hands. And a year ago he had known not one of these things, not one!

His hat was suddenly tipped forward over his eyes by some one who had entered the car at the last stop before the long straight run into the country.

“Hail, Demetrius, master of all the arts, and faithful priest at the altar of Hymen, move over and let a fellow pilgrim sit down!”

It was Balcomb, with his unfailing high spirits and undeniable claim upon the attention.

"Hello, Jack! What are you up to?" demanded Morris, with inner reluctance, making room for Balcomb beside him.

"What am I up to? Well, I like that! I guess this road is a common carrier all right, all right; and I bet a dollar we're headed for the same happy port."

Balcomb was dressed, as usual, in the latest style. His straw hat with its blue ribbon and his two-button double-breasted sack-coat were in the latest mode. He carried an overcoat of covert cloth on his arm and was further burdened with a parcel, wrapped in paper of bird's-egg blue and tied with silver string.

"Sweets for the sweet! Carrying coals to Newcastle,—honey to the beehive! Ah me! I nearly broke my neck making that car. I shall lodge a complaint with the company to-morrow. I honestly think I have lost a lung. I had to stop to see a customer of mine who's staying at the Imperial. Business and pleasure, all in one shot. I paid for these priceless confections, though,—sold a chunk of stock in my new flat company to an ancient jay from Bartholomew County."

"How's that flat scheme coming on?"

"Like a runaway trolley on a down grade. It's going to be a high persimmon all right."

"I don't doubt it; but you'd better be cautious. Flats are being much overdone."

"I haven't applied for a guardian, my son. My wagon's hitched to the more prosperous planets. You remember what old Prexy used to say at college,—'Hitch your wagon to a star, but keep your feet on solid earth.' I

only use part of that advice,—the first half, I may say. The earth is only good at so much per front foot. Read your answer in the stars,—that's my motto. And to make sure things don't get crowded, I say with Walt Whitman, 'I would not have the constellations any nearer.' No, by gum!"

"I'm glad to see that you still pump the well of English undefiled. It's commendable in you."

"Thanks, my brother. In sign of greeting, I raise high the perpendicular hand. That's Walt, you remember. But say, you look a little grumpy this evening. You don't show the spirit of a man who is going cheerfully to tell his love, but rather the air of one who lets concealment, like the worm in the peach, make free lunch of his damask cheek."

Leighton always hated himself for laughing at Balcomb, whose loquacity was so cheap that it was pathetic. Everything Balcomb knew he used constantly. At the college to which he referred in terms of raillery or contempt he had picked the nearest and gaudiest flowers; but he wore them all in an amazing bouquet that did not fail to impress many of his acquaintances as the real bloom of learning. Leighton was not at all glad to see Balcomb to-night. His friend's eternal freshness palled upon him. But it did not occur to Balcomb that Leighton might not be delighted to have him for a traveling companion. He thought his conversation was shortening the distance for Leighton. Balcomb had been making social history fast. He had, in his own phrase, "butted in"; and since the performance of *Deceivers Ever*, he had been included in most of the gatherings of the Dramatic Club circle.

"I say, old man," he began abruptly, as the car skimmed through a strip of woodland, "just between old college friends, what's your game, anyhow? Which is it?"

"Which is what?" demanded Leighton, who had been enjoying a moment with his own thoughts, while Balcomb stared out upon the darkling landscape.

"Which girl, I mean? There are two out here."

Leighton took off his hat and laughed.

"I haven't decided yet," he said presently, with an irony that was quite lost on Balcomb. "I'm a good fellow, though, and I'll take the one you leave."

"Miss Dameron's certainly a peach dumpling, all right. But say, the little cousin's a gem of purest ray serene. She ain't so stand-offish, some way, as her cousin; she jollies easier."

"I think I've noticed that;"—and the irony this time was meant for himself.

"They say olives are a cultivated taste," persisted Balcomb; "but lawsy, I knew right away that girl was a good thing. And, my God! to think that she has to teach a lot of grimy little muckers how to cook. There's something wrong in the divine economy, as Prexy used to say, when such a thing is possible."

"It is too bad, isn't it? But I don't think you need be sorry for her."

"Hell, no! She's as proud as Lucifer. Here's our stop."

The two men jumped out into the highway and started for the Dameron farm.

"I think a man ought to marry early," Balcomb announced, as they tramped along the road. "There's



John Ball Clay

Olive

nothing like a woman and a home to put snap into a man," he continued nobly. "A man fools away a whole lot of money in his bachelor days. Doing social stunts is expensive. Have you any idea what my carriage bill was last March? Eighty-four dollars! I honestly believe it would pay me to own a hack. But, I say, the man who will drag a girl to the theater in a street car is fit for treason, stratagems and the stone pile. It ain't enough to put 'em on four wheels when it's snowing; no, I make a specialty of hacks under the starry hosts of heaven, and eke the pale and haughty moon. There's no better way than that to get solid with a girl. There are some that put their faith in bonbons and a new novel now and then; but there isn't a girl in Mariona to-night that wouldn't rather go to see a good show in comfort than do anything else under the sun. Damn that June-bug! it nearly choked the life out of me. I say, about hacks, don't give it away, but I've just got a transfer company pass,—Wilson, the president, and I are pretty thick, and I do a little quiet work for the company occasionally. I helped 'em beat the vehicle tax before the council last winter, and I have an annual now that gives me power of life and death over all the company's rolling stock night and day. And you bet I won't use it or anything!"

Leighton's silence did not disturb Balcomb; he talked for the joy it gave him. They reached the Dameron gate and followed the winding path toward the veranda.

"Ahoy, O bower of beauty!" Balcomb called cheerily when they were within hailing distance of the veranda. "Friends draw near bringing tidings."

On the veranda, as Balcomb's voice smote upon the air,

two girls fell on each other's necks in mock ecstasy of grief.

"They're there, all right," announced Balcomb.

"If you yell at them again, they'll undoubtedly bolt," said Leighton, whose thoughts since they had left the car had been far away from Balcomb's babble.

"If you're not afraid of the June-bugs, we'll stay here," said Zelda, when she and Olive had shaken hands with the men.

"There's nothing better; it's the center of the universe right here," Balcomb declared. "I brought some poison for the June-bugs with me. I will place it on yonder rail, lest we forget, lest we forget."

This was Balcomb's happy idea of minimizing the value of his gift. He was relieved to find that Pollock was not there, and as it was past the usual calling hour in the latitude and longitude of Mariona, the army officer was not likely to appear. Ever since the unpleasant incident on the stairway at the Athenæum building, Balcomb had been in the undignified attitude of dodging Captain Pollock, though he had said, during Pollock's absence from town, exceedingly cruel things about the officer.

Mr. Dameron came out and shook hands with the young men, addressing a few words to each. Balcomb had called upon him repeatedly in reference to the purchase of the tract of land on the creek, but without encouragement. Dameron had just been wondering how he could communicate with the promoter without seeking him directly, and this call gave him an opportunity.

"By the way, Mr. Balcomb," said the old man, pleasantly, "sometime when you are passing, I'd be glad if

you'd call at my office. There's a matter of mutual interest that I'd like to speak to you about. A beautiful night, gentlemen. Very much cooler here than in the city, as you may have noticed." And he went down the steps and out upon the highway for his usual evening walk.

"A remarkable man, your father, Miss Dameron. He's quite the ideal business man of the old school," said Balcomb. "We youngsters are quicker on the trigger, but our aim isn't so sure. No siree; your father is an ideal business man."

He had spoken impressively. He would, in his own language, "make himself solid" when he had a chance. Leighton was talking to Olive, and Balcomb set about entertaining Zelda, with whom he had seldom enjoyed a tête-à-tête.

"This is one of my ideas,—to own a farm. It's in the blood, I guess. My people were all farmers,—not, I hope, in the sense of our slang usage,—ahem!—but tillers of the soil. I don't know that any of my people ever came out of the green, green wood to buy the green, green goods—you know how those old ballads run—we studied 'em at college—but I guess I'd be pretty hard to catch. Yes, a country place is the right thing. You must have a hundred acres here. Well, old Bill Thompson couldn't swing it. He went crazy on fancy cattle and blew his money on 'em hard. A man's got to make his pile in town before he can go in for fancy stock. You know what Senator Proctor, of Vermont, said to his guests,—a lot of swells from Washington. 'Champagne or milk,' he said at table, at his farm up in the Green Mountain state. 'Champagne or milk, take your choice, gentle-

men; one costs me just as much as the other.' I have a number of city friends who sport country places,—estates, I ought to say, and they tell me a farm eats up money like a strawstacker. But the idea is immense. Getting back to nature,—that's me all over."

He ran on monotonously. He was anxious to make an impression at once without relinquishing the floor.

"I suppose you and Miss Merriam do a lot of reading out here. What are the books one ought to talk about?"

"We don't read much—except the cook-books," replied Zelda.

"Ha! ha! That is rich,—from the great Miss Dameron, too. I like that! I suppose as a matter of fact you really spend every morning with the classics."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but our mornings are spent with cook-books. My cousin is writing a cook-book and we're reading all the old ones to be sure hers is all new. It's delightfully exciting."

"Wouldn't that jar one? I say, I want to speak right now for an autograph copy of the first edition of that book."

"Olive will be delighted," said Zelda. "It's designed, you know, for the *very* young."

"Oh, I say, but that flew up and hit me! Did you hear that, Morris? I wish you would persuade Miss Dameron to spare my life. She's trying her sharpest ax on me!"

"How unnecessary!" observed Morris, "and what a waste of the ax."

"There it goes again. Everybody has it in for me! Oh, well! My time will come!"

It came in an unexpected way. Captain Pollock was riding up the driveway. He was on very good terms at

The Beeches, and had been told that while there were lights there was a hope of finding some one at home.

"Here comes another messenger bearing tidings," said Balcomb, in his most cheerful note. "I hope it isn't bad news."

"No; it's Captain Pollock. That horse of his is a beauty, isn't it? I wish he would trade with me," answered Zelda.

"Horse-trading is a science, better let it alone," declared Balcomb.

He jumped up, fumbling for his watch, which he could not see in the dark of the veranda, but he made a pretense of looking at it.

"Leighton, if we're going to catch that nine-fifty car we've got to hustle. I have to see a man at the Imperial before he goes to bed. Good night, Miss Dameron; good night, Miss Merriam. Not going, Leighton? All right, I'll see you later."

He walked to the other end of the veranda, found his hat and coat, and bowed himself to the steps, keeping up a running fire of talk to the last. Pollock was tying his horse to a post at the side of the driveway, but Balcomb hurried past him without speaking.

Leighton groaned inwardly at the sight of Pollock, whom he liked well enough ordinarily. He did not understand the reason for Balcomb's hurried flight, so that the humor of the situation did not strike him.

"You may have Mr. Balcomb's seat there by the railing, if you like," said Zelda to Pollock.

"You do me too much honor," said the officer, as he shook hands with Leighton.

"Oh, I don't know!" and Olive's imitation of Balcomb's intonation was so true to life that they all laughed.

"I don't see why any one should laugh," said Zelda.

"I'm sure I don't," declared Pollock. He put back his arm against the railing, knocking down the box of candy that Balcomb had left behind him.

"Ah, I beg everybody's pardon!"

"You should beg Mr. Balcomb's pardon. He contributed that to our evening's enjoyment."

"How nice of him! It seems to be intact. I suppose I may as well prepare it for circulation."

"Mr. Balcomb's feelings might be hurt if he came back," suggested Zelda.

"He won't come back; I'll wager another box he won't," replied the officer, blandly, as he fumbled with the string. "Miss Dameron, permit me,—I'm sure they're delicious. Chocolates, I fancy, from the bouquet,—and, Miss Merriam, you will not decline. Mr. Leighton, a little candy now and then is relished by the wisest men. I propose Mr. Balcomb's health, to be eaten sitting and in silence."

"It isn't polite to treat the gift of a parting guest in that way," protested Olive. "I'm surprised at you, Captain Pollock."

"My manners are something execrable. I beg all your pardons. Now, as we have been refreshed through Mr. Balcomb's generosity, I move that we take advantage of the fine night—the moon is just getting over the trees—to take a little walk up the highway. Please don't say no!"

"The idea has merit," affirmed Leighton, with cheerful alacrity.

"There are no Indians," said Pollock, as the young women hesitated.

"If you're sure," said Zelda, "we'll risk it."

The girls gathered up their light wraps and they all set off down the driveway.

"If you will be good, Miss Dameron, you may feed one of Mr. Balcomb's chocolates to my charger," said Pollock, gravely.

"Unkind, most unkind! I'll do nothing of the sort."

When a man is in love, he becomes a master of harmless deceit and subterfuge. Morris Leighton had sought Zelda Dameron to-night with a great hope in his heart. He did not intend to miss a chance to talk to her alone, if he could help it. He had taken her wrap from her, and purposely dropped it; and he seemed to have difficulty in finding it, although it was a white thing that one could not miss in the moonlight, unless one were blind. But Zelda paused when they reached Pollock's horse, which whinnied and put out its nose to her in a friendly way.

"He used to bite at me when I first knew him; but he's getting quite friendly," said Zelda; and she patted the animal's pretty neck and bent and took the fore-foot that he raised for a hand-shake. Leighton's spirit sank at the suggestion of an apparent comradeship between Pollock and Zelda. She was on good terms with his horse even; and Morris Leighton had no horse! Army men always delighted women; a civilian really had little chance against a soldier. But Morris's spirit rose as Pollock and Olive walked away together.

"It's too bad that Mr. Balcomb hurried away so. He must be a busy man."

"I suppose he is," said Leighton.

"You and he are great friends, aren't you?"

"We have been acquainted a long time," replied Morris, guardedly.

"Oh!" murmured Zelda, in a note that carried contrition so deep that Leighton laughed.

"I didn't mean what you thought I did. We were in college together; and there's a tradition that college friendships are lasting ones. The fact is that Jack and I don't see much of each other."

As they reached the road, which lay white in the moonlight, Ezra Dameron came toward them, walking slowly, hat in hand, and the two watched him—his queer shuffling walk, his head bent, his gray hair touched with the silver of the moonlight.

"Won't you come with us, father?" said Zelda, as they met in the road.

"No; no, thank you, Zee. I have had my little constitutional. Don't go too far,—there may be malaria abroad."

Leighton looked furtively at Zelda. She had greeted her father kindly, happily; but there was something repellent in Ezra Dameron. Leighton never felt it more than to-night. That such a girl should have a father so wretched seemed impossible; but the thought quickened his love for her. There was something fine in her conduct toward her father; her unfailing gentleness and patience with him had impressed Leighton from the time of her home-coming. She made a point of speaking of him often and always with respect. Leighton was well aware that no one else, with the single exception of Michael Carr, ever spoke of Ezra

Dameron in anything but derision. Rodney Merriam never mentioned him at all, which was doubtless the safer way.

Farther along the road Pollock and Olive were tentatively singing a popular song of the hour.

"Sing it all,—don't pick at it that way," called Zelda.

"Sing it yourself, if you don't like it," came back the answer from Olive.

"There is only one song that I should care to hear to-night," said Leighton, after a moment of silence.

"Only one,—when there are such worlds of songs? Nothing will do me but a symphony played out there in the corn-field,—hidden away so you couldn't see the fiddles or the kettle-drum man."

"That's a large order. I should be content with less,—or more!"

"The one song,—what would you command?"

"It's the only song that ever meant a great deal to me."

"Oh, I know! One of Herr Schmidt's from his great operatic triumph of last winter. Your taste is only fair, then."

"It goes back a little farther than that. It's *Träume*,—*Tristan and Isolde*, wasn't it? Do you remember?"

"I have heard it sung, beautifully, in Berlin," she said evasively.

"I never did. But I heard you sing it once, and it has haunted me."

"Music sometimes has a way of doing that; but not Wagner usually. You must be one of his disciples. I wonder if I remember how that song goes."

She ran over a few bars of it lightly.

"Is that the one?" she asked. "Yes; it is about dreams."

"That is the one I meant. It is the most wonderful thing in the world!"

"I never thought very much about the words. The words of German songs are often very foolish."

"After they're translated. Which means that they oughtn't to be translated. But I'll admit that my German's about all gone, except the words of this song."

"Your hold on the language must be pretty slight then,"—and she laughed carelessly.

"My hold on everything is slight,—except for the song."

"That's very curious," she said, in matter-of-fact tones, "if you never heard it but once. And it's only about dreams anyhow!"

"Yes, it's only about dreams—a dream; but it's the sweetest dream in the world, it means—"

"A dream!" and she laughed again, but it was a mirthless little laugh.

He paused and looked out over the moonlit cornfield; his heart was beating fast. She felt for a moment that she must turn and fly from him; but he started forward again and she followed.

"It is more than a dream. I am building upon it as though it were a veritable rock."

"A dream—to build the real upon? The architects of fate don't like that plan, do they?"

"They have to like it,—for happy people are doing it every day, and a good many people escape calamity."

"It hadn't struck me so; there seem to be a good many unhappy people in the world."

She spoke a little forlornly, and then, before he could take advantage of her tone, "But I suppose it's unprofitable to discuss such things. And as your friend Mr. Balcomb says, 'I have no kick coming.' Slang is very expressive, isn't it?"

"But we must hold to our dreams," he said soberly.

"I suppose we must, even though they are things of air that only lead us astray. I didn't think you were sentimental. I'm afraid I can't sympathize exactly, for sentiment was left out of me utterly;" and she hated herself for the bravado with which she spoke.

"I can't believe that! Every one has it. I'm a thoroughly practical person, and yet I have my dreams,—my dream!"

Olive and Pollock were singing again. They were far in advance and their voices stole softly upon the night.

Zelda stopped to listen. Her heart was in a tumult of happiness and wonder. The splendor of the moonlight upon the fields about them, the gloomy shadow of the woodland beyond, the man beside her hesitating, yet ready to tell her of his love. There stole across her spirit the tremulous awe of a girl to whom love has come for the first time as it can never come again.

Leighton drew close to her.

"Zelda," he said, "Zelda!"

"No. Oh, no! You must not!" she cried.

"I love you, Zelda!" he said.

"No; you must not say it!" And there was a sob that caught her throat.

"You are the dream. It is too sweet; I can not lose it,—I must not."

Olive and Pollock called to them ironically.

"Answer them, please," she said, and Leighton spoke to them.

Zelda put her hand to her throat with a quick gesture, then dropped it.

"You have talked of dreams and love," she said hurriedly, but with a lingering note of contempt on the last word that stung him as though she had struck him in the face.

"Dreams and love," she repeated. "I wonder what love is!"

She laughed suddenly with a bitterness that he remembered for many a day.

"We're coming," she called, and hastened away toward her cousin and Pollock who waited, idling and trying their voices, and chaffing each other over their failure to carry a tune.

"We have gone far enough, Olive," she said. "Let us go back now."

They began retracing their steps, Zelda walking beside Pollock, to whom she talked with unusual vivacity. She did not speak to Leighton again until the two young men said good night at the veranda.

"What did you treat him that way for?" demanded Olive, facing Zelda in the hall as soon as the door closed.

"What are you talking about, *ma petite cousine*? The moon must have—"

"It wasn't the moon! You said something unkind to Mr. Leighton. He walked back to the house with me without saying a word. You shouldn't treat a man

that way, even if you are my cousin,—a fine, splendid fellow like Morris Leighton!”

“You foolish, sentimental young thing, what on earth has got into you? Mr. Leighton talked to me about Wagner,—I think it was Wagner, and he didn’t interest me a bit. I’m going to bed.”

She went to her room and closed and locked the door. Then she drew back the curtains and looked out upon the night. Through an opening in the trees she saw Pollock and Leighton standing together in the highway outside the gate. Pollock had walked out leading his horse and he stood for greater ease in talking to Leighton. The men were clearly outlined, for it was as light as day. Suddenly they shook hands; then they lifted their hats to each other. Pollock mounted his horse and rode off rapidly countryward, and Leighton turned toward the interurban station.

It was Leighton’s solitary figure that Zelda’s eyes followed. She saw him pause just at the edge of a strip of woodland, glance toward the house, and then walk slowly away, while her eyes still rested on the spot where she had seen him last.

It was a sweet thing to know that Morris Leighton loved her. She had felt that it would come sometime; it was one of the inevitable things; and his reference to her singing, to the dream, had thrilled her with an exquisite delight. Any woman might be proud of a love like his; yet she had treated it lightly, almost insolently; and a good woman might not lightly thrust aside the love of a good man!

She was still gazing with unseeing eyes upon the

moonlit world when Olive came to the door, tried it and found it locked.

"Wait a minute!" called Zelda, and she crossed the room and opened the door.

"Please, Cousin Zee, I came to beg forgiveness. I didn't mean to scold you,—about anything!"

Zelda drew her in, and put her arms about her.

"There's no one as fine and dear as you in all the world, Olive. I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did. I wouldn't hurt you for anything. And I was wrong! I am always wrong; I'm made wrong, that's what's the matter with me!"

And her dark eyes peered pitifully into Olive's blue ones.

"Please don't think I would meddle in your affairs, Zee. I was just sorry for Mr. Leighton, that's all. He's so fine and strong and good,—and he seemed so dejected, or I thought he did."

"Oh, it's the goodness; it's the goodness that I *hate*!" cried Zelda. "Please go,—I don't know what I mean," and she thrust Olive into the hall and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXV

A NEW ATTITUDE

There are a number of things that an attorney and counselor at law is likely to do when distracted. Morris Leighton was convinced that the universe in general was out of joint and he did not care who suffered. He rebuked the stenographer sharply about an error that crept into a demurrer he had dictated, which was not her fault at all, but Leighton's; and the discovery that he had, with his own hand, addressed an important letter to Portland, Maine, that should have gone to Portland, Oregon, did not tend to ease his spirit; nor did he lift the burden that lay upon his soul by scolding the office boy for complicity in the loss of the letter, when the boy was neither physically nor morally responsible.

He was quite confident that he should never see Zelda Dameron any more. He knew she would not care, and he tried to assure himself that it made no difference to him, but without any great degree of success. He was lonely, for Rodney Merriam had accompanied Mrs. Forrest to Saratoga, a place which the Merriams had visited in days gone by, and which Mrs. Forrest wished to see again—she so expressed herself—before she died. Rodney Merriam had departed in a low state of mind, for he declared to Morris in confidence that if

there was any choice between the place of eternal punishment and Saratoga it was not in favor of Saratoga.

So Zelda had gone out of Morris's life and Rodney Merriam, his best friend, had left town, and he abused the fates that had ordained his own presence in Mariona when it had suddenly become a hateful spot to him; or, in the way of young men who find the path of love difficult, he thought it had.

While in this frame of mind he walked down Jefferson Street one July morning on his way to the office of the clerk of the Supreme Court. He was sure that he did not think of Zelda Dameron any more and he was congratulating himself on the ease with which he had forgotten her, when he saw, hitched at the curb just ahead of him, Zan, with the runabout. There was a book-shop near at hand,—a real book-shop, with a big fireplace and many pleasant corners. Morris being, as has been said, bound for the State House, remembered suddenly that he was particularly anxious to see the midsummer number of a certain magazine. The doors of the book-shop stood wide open; Zan was hitched outside; the moment seemed opportune for a study of the periodical counter, so Morris entered.

Very likely if Zelda should prove to be there, she would not speak to him; she had certainly used him ill; she had always dealt harshly with him; and the remembrance of her treatment of him at their last interview rankled. But he walked down the long aisle of the shop, under the pleasant delusion that he was looking for a magazine, whereas he was looking for the owner of Zan. At the periodical counter a clerk told him the old story, that they were just out of the magazine he

sought, and he answered that they need not trouble to get it. As a matter of fact he always read it at the Tippecanoe Club and had not the slightest wish to buy it. Zelda was clearly not there and he started out, abusing the shop for never having anything he wanted,—or, at least, he thought it was the shop that aroused his indignation, whereas his spirit was in rebellion against himself.

Near the door there was a long bench where you might take down a book and read, if you liked; and sitting in a corner, and looking very cool and collected sat Olive Merriam, a book in her hand and a smile of interest on her face. The interest was wholly centered in the book, for it was Olive's way to make the most of the passing moment; and she was as completely lost in the volume she held in her hand as though she were in her own room at home. She made a pretty picture in the corner—an altogether charming picture—the slight, fair-haired girl against the dark wood and black leather of the bench. If he couldn't see Zelda the sight of Olive was the next best thing. They had undoubtedly driven into town together; Zelda was probably not far away. Morris would not, of course, have spoken to Zelda had she been there instead of Olive; but Olive was always approachable and amiable. Yet he felt a trifle conscious as he stopped and bade Zelda Dameron's cousin good morning.

"It's too bad to disturb you; you have an appearance of comfort that rests the soul."

"Generously spoken! I'm waiting; and while I wait I may as well be cool."

"Oh, you're waiting," said Morris, irrelevantly.

Olive looked up at him innocently, and asked:

"Yes; aren't you—for the same person?"

"No; I was just passing—I had an errand in here."

"I'm glad you did," declared Olive, soberly. "I think we should always do our errands. Zee and I are doing a few this morning."

"Oh yes; you and Miss Dameron. I thought I recognized Zan at the door."

"It was very discerning of you, to be sure; and then—you thought of your errand!" and Olive held up her book and scanned the gilt top with minute care. When she looked at him he was laughing and she laughed, too. "Let's be serious," she said. "I don't believe I understand your tactics. You'll have to get better—as Mr. Balcomb would say. You're what he'd call a rank quitter."

Morris made a wry face.

"I thank you for the diagnosis. I suppose we're referring to the same thing."

"Or person. Undoubtedly. And I may as well be quite frank with you. They have all told me how talented you are; but I really don't see it. It's a good thing you've quit; you couldn't have made it anyhow. I warned her against you in the beginning, and I rarely make mistakes."

He had begun the day humbly and her mild flagellation was grateful to his bruised spirit.

"You're the pride of the bar, aren't you?" she asked sweetly.

"Now you're touching me where I'm sensitive. You can afford to be merciful."

"Only to the deserving. You've always rather flat-

tered yourself that you were quick of apprehension and all that sort of thing,—that you took in a situation without having it forced upon you. You've had just such conceit, Mr. Leighton, and it hasn't been justified by the facts."

"I'll admit everything you could charge against me; but what can I do? I did my best."

"Which wasn't very good, I must say. You weary me beyond words, Mr. Leighton!"

They both laughed at her earnestness.

"If I were you I shouldn't face her here; and she will be here in a minute. You'd better go. If you should care enough for our good opinion to come out to see us—please note the plurals—I'll see if I can do anything for you. But you have neither tact nor judgment. And you're certainly an awful lot of trouble."

He smiled cheerfully. He felt that under her irony she really meant to be encouraging.

"I think I'll come out to-night, if you don't mind," said Morris.

"Oh, suit yourself! Don't put yourself out for anything in the world. But"—and Olive hesitated and looked at Morris searchingly—"you're very slow of comprehension or you might know that—that she has other burdens to bear—besides you! And now I'm sorry I said that to you, for it isn't fair to her; so please run on and don't be foolish any more."

She dropped her eyes to her book and did not look at him again.

Morris went to the State House but Zelda was in his thoughts all day. He knew Olive well enough to understand that she wished him to know that Zelda's way was

not all clear; and he at once conjectured that it must be her father who was the cause of her trouble. He was as angry with himself as even Olive could have wished for having sulked since Zelda rebuffed him. He could not imagine how much Olive knew of what had occurred the last time he visited the farm; but she clearly meant to encourage him in her own somewhat unsatisfactory way. As he speculated upon the matter, the wish to aid Zelda, if he could, took possession of him to the exclusion of all other thoughts of her; and evening found him bound for the farm, behind a very fair livery horse. The possibility of meeting Balcomb again was not to be risked.

When he reached the farm-house Mr. Dameron was sitting on the veranda with Zelda and Olive. After discussing the heat of the city and the lower temperature of the country for a few minutes he went into the house.

"I have some papers to study. I never quite free myself of business. Do so when you are young, Mr. Leighton—you'll not have an opportunity later on."

He bowed and walked with his shuffling step across the veranda and into the house. Olive did most of the talking now that the young people were alone. She wished to create as much cheer as possible before disappearing; and she lingered until there was hardly a possibility that any one else would come,—unless it should be Pollock, and Pollock, she said to herself, was a wise young man who knew well enough that two are company and three are not. She rose abruptly.

"Zelda, I haven't written to mother for a week. I must get busy—as Mr. Leighton's old college friend says, or I can't mail my letter to-morrow. Please don't

notice my absence. If you hear a sound of murder inside it will be I—fighting June-bugs.”

It was pleasant on the veranda. The night was one of stars, the moon that had shone upon Leighton's previous visit having gone the way of old moons. Insects fretted the dark with their dissonances. The air was heavy with the sweetness and languor of a midsummer night. Far away, through the trees, a soft light crept silently; it was steady and strong and seemed to cut a path for itself. There was something weird and unearthly about it, as it lighted here and there some new bit of landscape; but presently a low rumble began to accompany it and explained away its mystery. It was an interurban car's powerful electric headlight marking a ghostly right of way across farms and through woodlands.

“Not bad, that,” said Leighton when the light had disappeared.

“No. It makes our nights more interesting. We can follow the headlight for miles from our upper windows. It suggests a goblin stealing across the country with a bull's-eye lantern.”

“Looking for what?”

“Other goblins, I should think.”

The talk of ghosts seemed ominous and Leighton changed the subject. She seemed to him more baffling than ever—a part of the night's mystery.

“I had a brief note from Mr. Merriam to-day. He seems to be taking his Saratoga rather sadly.”

“Aunt Julia hasn't written me at all. She feels that I've basely deserted her. Uncle Rodney writes to me every day or two to tell me how charming it is, and how

many perfectly lovely young women he meets. He does that to increase my sorrow in staying at home."

"We'll have to confront him with our respective letters, your cheerful one and mine in a doleful key, when he comes back."

"Dear Uncle Rodney! He can be just as disagreeable to me as he pleases. I believe I'd rather have him scold me than have the praise of most people," said Zelda.

Olive had not warned her of Morris's coming, but her cousin's plea of letter-writing as an excuse for going indoors was not wholly sincere, as Zelda knew. But there was no escaping this talk with Morris Leighton on the veranda, and she began with sudden energy to speak rapidly of many irrelevant and frivolous things. It was not an easy matter to meet thus a man who a fortnight before had declared himself her lover. She did not try to-night her old manner of chaffing him almost to the point of impudence; she had no heart for that now. And she felt moreover his manliness and strength; there was an appeal in her heart that almost cried to him. She talked of the past winter; of the Dramatic Club; of the drolleries of Herr Schmidt, and of the people who had fled the town for the summer, and all with a gaiety that did not ring true.

Her father came out presently, evidently absorbed in thought, and went down the walk without speaking to them. They heard the beat of his stick beyond the gate as he followed the country road that lay between his corn-fields. The sight of him was proving an increasing trial to her, for she felt day by day the burden of the task she had assumed in living with him. The

contact with him grew more irksome. His ways grew increasingly strange. He was pressing all his debtors, and some of them came to the house to beg for time. She overheard several of these interviews in which her father had been unyielding in his cloyingly sweet way. If he had been an open criminal, it would have been easier to bear. If only her mother had not left that last injunction! But that poor pitiful prayer was never out of her thoughts:

"Perhaps I was unjust to him; it may have been my fault; but if she can respect or love him I wish it to be so."

She was not aware of the interval of silence that lay like a gulf between her and Morris, so intent was she upon her own thoughts. Then he began as though continuing the discussion of a subject just dropped.

"I didn't come again at once because it was easier not to. But I have come to repeat that what I said then is still true—truer than it was then."

"Please don't, please don't!" A pitiful little sob broke from her and wrung his heart. But he went on.

"That is what I came to say. I have thought that perhaps I did not say just what I meant,—that I did not make you understand."

She was silent and he added:

"It is a man's right to tell a woman that he loves her."

"I suppose it is," said Zelda, hurriedly; "but I ask you, if you are my friend,—if you care to be anything to me, not to talk of things that only trouble me."

"And I suppose," said Leighton, not heeding her, "that a woman will be as kind to him as she can,

whether the idea pleases her or not. Women are naturally kind-hearted,—at least, they have that reputation.”

“You flatter us,” said Zelda, coldly.

“It must be pleasant occasionally to be arbitrary,—to do things a little extraordinary just because we dare,” he persisted.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about;” but she liked to have him speak to her so.

“For instance,” he went on; “suppose we are to take part in amateur theatricals,—suppose, for example, we are assigned the principal part. We rehearse and do finely, and are about to make the hit of our lives. Then it occurs to us suddenly that one of our friends—or relatives—say a cousin—never has had the same chance that we have had, and we decide to give her additional prominence and obscure ourselves a little, all in her interest; and we go ahead and do it, even though it is a shock to a whole lot of people. And I suppose you thought all the time that nobody guessed what you were doing. So sometimes it may please a woman,—she may be the noblest and fairest of women,—to play a part—and you—?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you are talking about, Mr. Leighton,” she answered. “I have looked upon you as a friend, and after you had been moved by the moonlight to say things that were not—wholly friendly and that were distasteful to me, I should think that in ordinary decency you would not refer to the matter again.”

“I’m sorry to offend, but if you thought it was the moonlight—”

“I don’t care what it was!”

"If you don't care what it was,—sun, moon or stars, then you make my task all the greater. I think you don't quite understand about me. You recommended that I get the moose—"

"Please forgive all that," she begged in real contrition. "You have no right to quote me against myself. You imply that I was—"

"Flirting? Nothing of the kind. You suggested last winter that I was immensely conceited and you intimated in the friendliest possible way that there were fields I hadn't conquered. It was wholesome and stimulating and I thanked you in my heart for taking the trouble to tell me."

"Well, you didn't get the moose, did you?" and she laughed.

"No; but I won a case in the Supreme Court," he declared in a droll tone, at which both laughed; and she felt easier.

"I can't accept the substitute," she said. "A moose is a moose; and the Supreme Court doesn't sound very amusing to me. If you had really been interested I should have had the moose-head long ago. But you are not chivalrous. You have lost an opportunity. I wasn't worth the trouble. And now I believe I am tired of this. Let us change the subject."

"Certainly not!" he exclaimed, so cheerfully that they both laughed at his alacrity.

He had spoken with a decisive confidence and authority that was part of his new attitude toward her. He had no intention of losing her; but he must wait; and meanwhile she should understand.

"I am not going to make myself a nuisance to you,

but what I have said I am likely to repeat almost at any time; and some day, whether you will or not, you shall listen to me. And meanwhile I shall be, if you will, your friend and very obedient servant. You see, you already think me conceited; Miss Merriam has told me that *she* thinks so,—and I'm giving you real reason for thinking so. And now, let us talk of other things!"

She was silent under the shadow of the vines and he spoke in a different key as he turned to things that were of no importance whatever. The step of Ezra Dameron sounded once more down the road and they heard the gate close after him; and soon the gravel crunched under his feet near at hand.

He came up leaning heavily on his stick, breathing hard, for the night was still and hot.

Leighton rose and placed a chair for him.

"You'd better rest here before going in," said Zelda, very kindly.

"And tell us how the corn looks," added Morris.

Dameron stood at the edge of the veranda looking up at the heavens abstractedly, seemingly forgetful of their presence. He turned suddenly.

"The corn—the corn—who spoke of the corn?" he demanded. And then, half-aloud to himself, passing the two young people as though ignorant of their presence, "The corn, the corn, the beautiful corn!"

The vines about the veranda made a dark screen back of Zelda, shutting out the faint starlight and the lights of the house. She sat in a low chair with her hands clasping its rough arms, and it was well that her eyes could not be seen, for there had come into them a look of

sorrow and weariness and fear that is best not seen in the eyes of a girl.

Morris was not wholly dull or stupid. Olive, sitting up stairs with a book which she was not reading, would have thought well of him, if she had heard. He rattled on amiably about the future of the Dramatic Club, in which he was not the least interested.

"Next winter we must be sure to try a vaudeville show. It will be a lot easier than the opera. People who are as solemn as owls are usually delighted to black up and do specialty acts. I believe I'd do a black face myself—to renew my youth."

Zelda's slim hands had dropped from the arms of the chair; and her spirit was at ease again. Perhaps Morris understood! Her gratitude went out to him bountifully.

"It's absurd—talking of amateur theatricals in the dead of summer; but *my* family aren't Quakers; so I don't practise silence!" Morris rose hastily and seized his hat and gloves.

"You needn't have mentioned it; I had noticed it!" she said; then she laughed happily, and went quickly into the house.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN AUGUST NIGHT ADVENTURE

Captain Pollock had gone into town to mail a report to his chief, and he rode homeward through the starry August night in a tranquil frame of mind. It made not the slightest difference to Frank Pollock, U. S. A., that the powers were dilatory in beginning work on the new post; and an elaborate correspondence with headquarters which might, under ordinary circumstances, have proved vexatious, did not trouble him in the least. He was hardly likely to be transferred under the existing circumstances, and if there was anything that pleased him just now it was the privilege of remaining unmolested at his farm-house headquarters. For it was the easiest matter in the world to ride over to the Dameron farm, where Zelda was always very kind to him and where Olive Merriam called him openly an assassin and charged him with responsibility for all the evils of the military establishment, about which, to be sure, she knew very little.

As he neared the farm-house he saw that its lights were not yet extinguished, but showed cozily through the trees.

"I wish I had a little nerve," he reflected. "If I had I should not linger outside the wicket." He let his horse

walk by the gate as the lights teased his eyes, glowing plainly for a moment and then disappearing; and he hummed to himself:

“‘Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes
May weep, but never see;
A night of memories and sighs
I consecrate to thee.’”

“‘These wakeful eyes’—Frank Pollock, whose are they, I pray?” he reflected. “Songs are foolish things. I never saw one yet that really expressed my feeling. I wonder if Mr. Jack Balcomb is there with his sublime nerve. I shall have to punch his head at the earliest opportunity, bad luck to him! Or perhaps it is my young friend, Mr. Leighton, Bachelor of Laws, who is lingering there in the bower of beauty. If it be so, then may he remain forever a bachelor of laws and of all things visible and invisible. Get up, Ajax.”

The horse sprang to a gallop. Pollock had passed the line of fence that marked the boundaries of the Dameron house and turned and glanced back. As he settled again into the saddle something rustled oddly in the corn-field at his right. It was dim starlight and there was no wind stirring; yet directly at his right hand something was moving the corn.

“Mr. Dameron doesn’t take care of his fences. I’d better get that cow out for him.”

Pollock swung himself from the saddle and the horse stood perfectly quiet, while his master jumped the ditch at the side of the road and peered over the fence.

A voice rose suddenly, quite near at hand:

“‘Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves;
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.’”

It was the low voice of a man singing to himself,—a quavering, senile voice.

Pollock climbed upon the stake-and-rider fence and watched and listened. Some one was walking through the corn with irregular step, chanting in a strained, high voice.

The charred stump of an old tree rose almost as high as the corn and presently, as Pollock watched and listened, the figure of the singer reached and clambered upon it. Pollock sprang down among the corn and crept closer. There was something weird and fascinating in the chant that continued to rise from the solitary figure on the stump. The outline of a man was now quite clearly defined,—an unquiet figure, that moved its arms fantastically, and once or twice, as the refrain ceased, it laughed in a harsh way.

Pollock had drawn quite near between the tall ranks of corn.

“‘We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.’
Ha, ha, ha! Rejoicing; yes, it shall be with rejoicing!”

There was no mistaking the figure or the voice now. Dameron’s sharp features were plainly distinguishable. He was without his hat; he sat stiffly on the tree-stump, with his shoulders erect and his legs barely touching the ground. Suddenly he raised his long arms toward the heavens as though in supplication:

“Make it grow; make the corn grow, O merciful heavens! Then I shall be rich. I shall be very rich. And Zelda, she shall be rich, too. O corn, O beautiful corn!”

His shoulders drooped and he seemed about to collapse. Then he straightened himself with sudden energy.

"Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves;
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves."

He leaped from the stump and sprang out into the corn, darting so near to Pollock that the young man barely slipped away from him.

"No! No! I say there is too much corn! Too much, I say! Millions and millions of bushels in the world! There is too much; too much! I shall lose my money, my daughter's money, if there is any more! I must trample it down; trample it down!"

He began threshing about, waving his arms wildly and breaking down the stalks. Then he started with a quick step, as though he were marching, through a narrow aisle between two rows, chanting meanwhile in a voice so low that Pollock barely heard him:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath
are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift
sword;
His truth is marching on."

Pollock followed him, hardly knowing what to do. It was inconceivable that Ezra Dameron was drunk, but at any rate something was wrong, and Pollock felt a certain responsibility for him.

"Poor girl; that poor girl!" the young man muttered.

The strange noise ahead of him ceased abruptly, and Pollock drew nearer until he saw that the old man knelt and clasped several stalks of corn in his arms. His voice rose tremulously and was hardly audible; he was praying, but the only words that Pollock heard were "the corn, the corn," constantly repeated.

Then Ezra Dameron's voice rose with unwonted strength as he repeated in a shrill pipe:

"There shall be an handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon: and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth."

The old man collapsed, pitched forward and lay very still; the stalks of corn released from his arms sprang back to their places with a lingering rustle and whisper.

Pollock drew nearer until he stood by the prostrate figure of the old man, who lay on his face, with his arms flung out.

"Mr. Dameron! Mr. Dameron!"

There was no response, and Pollock pushed aside the corn-stalks and bent down.

"Are you ill? Are you hurt?"

Dameron lay quiet on the ground, which was hard from the August drought. Pollock felt of his hands and found them warm. He brought the limp figure to a sitting posture and repeated again the old man's name.

"The corn; the corn!" came in a guttural whisper, and Dameron found command of himself and tried to rise.

"Wait a moment; you are ill; you must rest a bit," said Pollock.

Dameron turned his head from side to side and put

one tremulous hand to his throat with a helpless gesture.

"The corn; the corn! Who are you? Say, who are you?" And he caught hold of Pollock's coat lapels and tried to lift himself by them.

"It's Pollock. Don't be alarmed. You are ill. I will help you back to the house."

"Thank you; thank you. But I need no help. I was walking; just walking. I am quite well."

He seemed to regain his strength suddenly and stood up, leaning heavily upon Pollock.

"Yes, you are Captain Pollock. I remember you very well, sir,—very well, sir. I'm quite surprised to see you."

"I was afraid you were ill," said Pollock, standing back, while Dameron shook himself and beat the dirt from his clothing.

"You seem to be all right. I thought you were sick. I heard you from the road as I was passing."

"You heard me? Yes. I was looking at the field. I am very fond of walking at night. It's quieting to the nerves. Yes. My physician recommended it. I suppose, at your age, and in your profession, you are not troubled with nerves. You are very fortunate. I must go back to the house. They will be alarmed if I am gone too long."

He started off briskly toward the road down a long lane of corn, Pollock following him, surprised at his quick recovery.

"The night is fine," said the old man, tramping over the clods and brushing swiftly through the corn-stalks.

"The August nights are beautiful in these parts. This

is the season of the shooting stars. Ah,—there is one now,”—and he pointed to the glittering vault where a meteor shot silently athwart the heavens, leaving a faint, soft light behind.

“That was a fine one,” said Pollock.

“Verily, it was, sir.” The old man continued, standing with head uplifted following the track of the star, and he repeated with unction: “‘O ye stars of heaven, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him forever.’ That,” he added, “is in the Apocrypha, as you doubtless remember.”

Then he turned and hurried on, Pollock following and with difficulty keeping at his heels.

When they reached the fence Dameron climbed it spryly and dropped down on the other side near Pollock’s horse.

“You will allow me to walk to the house with you; you must be very tired,” said Pollock, mystified by the old man’s strange behavior.

“No; oh, no! I am very well. You are quite mistaken in thinking me ill. I frequently walk abroad at night. I was merely looking at the corn. I’m away all day so that I have little time for inspecting the farm.”

“Your corn-field is very handsome. I pass it frequently,” said Pollock, still mystified.

“Yes; the soil is rich. Now, you must go on your way. I’m sorry to have troubled you, but I’m feeling very well. Never better in my life.”

But Pollock continued at his side. It was only a few rods to the wagon gate and he persisted until they reached it.

Two figures were coming down the driveway and

paused inside the gate. Zelda had missed her father when they prepared to close the house for the night, and she and Olive had gone out to look for him.

"Is that you, father?"

"Yes, my daughter. The night is glorious, isn't it?"

Then taking Pollock by the arm he whispered: "Pray say nothing about our meeting. I will explain that. You meant kindly enough, but you were mistaken."

Pollock spoke to the young women cheerily and waited for Dameron to make some sign.

"I was walking up the road," the old man explained, "and Mr. Pollock came by and stopped to talk to me. We were commenting on the superb beauty of the heavens. And did you see that meteor a moment ago? It was the finest of the season."

"No; we didn't see it," said Zelda. "We have been in the house all the evening."

"Yes; you girls leave it to practical fellows like Mr. Pollock and me to go star-gazing," said her father, jauntily.

Zelda had opened the gate. Pollock declined her invitation to come up to the house.

"It must be quite late," he said. "And I have a horse down the road somewhere. Good night. Good night, Mr. Dameron."

He went slowly back to where his horse was cropping the grass at the roadside.

"If I'd been drinking I'd be sure I had 'em," he reflected half-aloud. "But I haven't been. The old man seemed to be as sober as a judge when I picked him up. And he was certainly unusually polite after we started back through the corn. I hope he won't have another

attack and murder those girls in their beds. He's a deep one. He carried off that situation at the gate like an actor. Of course, I shan't mention his performance in the corn-field,—not much, my brother!"

Pollock swung himself into the saddle and turned his horse for a moment toward the Dameron house. He lifted his hat sweepingly and bowed low in the saddle.

"Good night, ladies!" Then he swung his horse homeward and went forward at a gallop, singing as he rode under the stars:

" 'Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes
May weep, but never see;
A night of memories and sighs
I consecrate to thee.' "

He was a little fellow,—and there was much of the heart of a boy in him.

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. BALCOMB'S EASY CONSCIENCE

Ezra Dameron had never been happier than during this summer. His life had run for years an eventless course; his interests had been small and he had been content to have them so. But since the gambler's passion had fixed its gyves upon him he had become a changed being. He walked with a quicker step; his drooping shoulders grew erect; he was a new man, living in a new paradise that folly was constructing for him. He enjoyed the farm greatly, rising betimes to direct the work of his laborers. He permitted Zelda to drive him in her runabout to the interurban station—a concession in itself significant of a greater deference to the comfort and ease of living.

Jack Balcomb's flat scheme had hung fire during the spring, with only half the stock of the Patoka Land and Improvement Company sold; but Balcomb had taken it up again, determined to carry it through. Dameron always insisted, when Balcomb approached him, that he did not care to sell the tract on the creek which the promoter coveted; but he never rebuffed Balcomb entirely. It had occurred to Dameron that Balcomb might be of use to him. The young man was, moreover, a new species, who talked of large affairs in an intimate way

that fell in well with Dameron's new ideas of business, and he accepted Balcomb at as high a valuation as he ever placed upon any one.

Balcomb was quick to act on the hint given unexpectedly by Dameron at the farm. He called at once at the dingy office in the Dameron Block. It was a hot midsummer morning and Balcomb was a pleasing object as he appeared at the door of Ezra Dameron's private office. Balcomb had lately fallen under the spell of a New York tailor who solicited business among Mariona young men, and his figure lent itself well to metropolitan treatment. The blue silk socks that filled the margin between his half-shoes and gray trousers expressed a fastidious taste, and his negligée shirt matched them exactly. Having discarded a waistcoat for greater comfort in the hot weather, he wore his watch in the outer pocket of his coat, with a bit of chain and the key of the Phi Beta Kappa Society showing.

"Good morning, Mr. Dameron. Your office is positively cool. You ought to advertise it—the coolest place in the city. That's what I'd do if I had it. I have a south exposure, cheerful in winter, but ghastly in summer. These inside rooms are the only thing, after all; and they're cheaper. We youngsters can still sit with profit at the feet of our elders."

He eyed a decrepit chair by Dameron's desk, sat down in it with misgivings, and fanned himself with his straw hat, whose blue ribbon, it may be said, was of exactly the same tint as his shirt and socks.

"You are very prompt, Mr. Balcomb. I trust my chance word of the other night hasn't put you to inconvenience."

"Don't worry about me! I flatter myself that I know when to go and when to come, and a word from a man of your standing is enough for a novice like me. There's a disposition all along the line to crowd out old men, but I tell you, Mr. Dameron, we've got a lot to learn from the senior class. I flatter myself that I have among my friends some of the grandest old men in the state, and I'm proud of it."

"A worthy sentiment,—a very worthy sentiment, Mr. Balcomb."

"I consider, Mr. Dameron, that anything I may be able to do for you is to my credit. It looks well to the public for a young tyro in business to win the confidence of one of the conservatives. Doctor Bridges, over at Tippecanoe—you know the doctor?—"

"I know him very well, indeed."

Doctor Bridges, the president of Tippecanoe College, was a venerable Presbyterian minister, widely beloved for his many virtues. Dameron's face lighted at the mention of the name. Balcomb saw that he had struck the right note and continued volubly:

"Well, sir, I was the doctor's secretary in my junior and senior years, and I shall always feel that I learned more from that venerable old patriarch than from my books. The doctor used to say to me in that sweet, winning way of his: 'Balcomb,' he would say, 'be honest, be just.' Over and over again he would repeat those words, and they got to be a sort of rule of life with me. It's wonderful how many places they fit. I tell you, sir,"—and a quaver crept into his voice—"a young man's temptations these days are mighty hard to deal with. Half a dozen times I've seen places where

I could have fixed myself for life by doing things—promoting schemes and all that—that most any business man would call legitimate. But every time the doctor's dear old face has risen up before me and I've heard that admonition of his, 'Balcomb, be honest, be just,' and it lost me money; but I guess it saved my conscience."

Dameron listened sympathetically to this recital, nodding his head gravely from time to time.

"Doctor Bridges is a splendid man, a man of great spiritual power. I consider myself fortunate in having had him for my friend these forty-odd years."

"Well," said Jack, with an air of suddenly wakening to present duty; "I didn't come here to take up your time with reminiscences."

"I have enjoyed your remarks very much," said Dameron, who had not, indeed, heard a great deal of what Balcomb said. He was thinking of his own enterprises, and of his present need of money to maintain his margins. He wished to make use of Balcomb without committing himself to the sale of the strip on the creek. That was a valuable piece of land; it was increasing rapidly in value, and even in his extremity Ezra Dameron had no thought of fooling it away. But Balcomb's airiness and persistence had made their impression on Dameron. He did not realize it, but he and the young promoter had much in common. They belonged to different eras and yet there was a certain affinity between them.

"Mr. Balcomb," said Dameron, tipping himself back in his chair, "you have suggested to me the possibility of selling a strip of land I hold as trustee out here on the creek. As I have told you before, I do not care to sell at this time. I have, however, some lots southwest

of town, also a part of a trust, which I have about decided to dispose of. Several factories have been built in the neighborhood, and the lots are already in demand by mechanics who wish to build themselves homes. I have declined to sell them separately, as most of those people wish to pay a little at a time, and I don't care to sell in that way. I am at an age, Mr. Balcomb, when I don't like to accept promises for the future. Do I make myself clear?"

"Certainly, Mr. Dameron," said Balcomb, with a note of sympathy that was almost moist with tears.

"But if you can manage this and sell those lots so as to bring me cash I shall be willing to pay you a commission, —the usual commission."

"In other words," said Balcomb, "you wish me to find purchasers for the lots and sell them out so as to bring you the money in a lump. How much do you want for them?"

"I think for the corner lots I should get twelve hundred and fifty dollars each; the inside lots I hold to be worth a thousand. But we'll say fifty thousand for all."

There was an inquiry in his words and his eyes questioned Balcomb in a way that made the young man wonder. It is not the part of what is known as a good trader to show anxiety, and the old man's tone and look were not wasted on Balcomb. The young fellow knew a great many things about human nature, and ever since he had seen Ezra Dameron enter the broker's office he had set the old man down as a fraud. The reason Dameron gave for turning the lots over to him to sell was hardly convincing. Balcomb was nothing if not suspicious,

and it occurred to him at once that Dameron was in straits; and at the same moment he began to devise means for turning the old man's necessities to his own advantage.

"Here is a plat of the property. Suppose you study the matter over and let me know whether you care to attempt the sale."

"As you wish, Mr. Dameron. I'll come in, say, tomorrow at this hour."

"Very well," said Dameron, coldly. "I don't want you to undertake the matter unless you can handle it in bulk."

The Dameron addition of fifty lots was an inheritance from old Roger Merriam, Zelda Dameron's grandfather. It had been a part of Margaret Dameron's share of her father's estate, and was held by Ezra Dameron in trust for Zelda. Manufacturing interests had lately carried improvements that way, but Dameron's efforts to sell lots had not been successful, as his prices were high and the menace of expensive improvements gave pause to the working people who were the natural buyers. Then Dameron had become interested in larger matters than the peddling of lots, and he had given no serious thought to selling until he felt the need of obtaining more ready money for use in his speculations.

As Balcomb turned to go a boy came in with a telegram. It was from the brokers in Chicago through whom Dameron was trading in grain. The market had opened wildly on news that the drought had done little actual damage to the corn crop. An hour later he was advised that his margins had been wiped out; he made them good from funds he was now carrying in

Chicago and ordered the sale of unimpeachable securities to replenish his account.

Dameron, whose mind was singularly prosaic, had of late been reading into his speculations a certain poetic quality, though he did not suspect it. He had never been a farmer and had only the most superficial knowledge of farming. Yet he had studied all summer long the growth of the corn in his own fields at The Beeches. He had reckoned the rainfall of the region and compared it with the figures given in books of statistics for other years. He covered hundreds of sheets of paper during the long summer days with computations, and played with them as a boy with the knack of rhyming plays at tagging rhymes. He cherished first the idea that the year would be marked by excessive rainfalls which would be detrimental to the corn crop, and when the government bulletins failed to bear him out in this he assured himself that the year would be marked by late frosts that would destroy the crop over a wide area. He proved to his own satisfaction, by means of the tables he had compiled, that dollar corn was inevitable.

This idea took a strong hold upon his imagination. It was fascinating, the thought of playing a great game in which the sun and winds and clouds of heaven were such potent factors. There was a keen satisfaction in the fact that he could study the whole matter from the secure vantage ground of his own office, and that when he went home at night, there it was across the road from his own gate, under his eye, the beloved corn, tall and rustling, beautiful and calm, but waiting for the hand of the destroyer. Even this, his own, should perish, and yet he was accumulating scraps of paper that called for thou-

sands of bushels of corn at a time when it would grieve many short-sighted men sorely to deliver it to him.

An enormous conceit was bred in him and he fed it upon his dreams,—dreams of power. The Chicago broker sent him prognostications and forecasts which the old man threw away in disgust. They were fools, all of them. He asked no man's suggestions; they were afraid of him, he assured himself, when the reports were contrary to his own ideas; and when they coincided with his own notions he flattered himself that they proved his own wisdom. He made good his margins as fast as called on, but continued to buy October corn, basing his purchases on a short crop. Always it was corn, corn, corn!

He waited patiently for Balcomb to report, for if he could get fifty thousand dollars more to put into corn his triumph would be all the greater. He waited feverishly for the hour which the promoter had set and when Balcomb appeared he could scarcely conceal his impatience. He had just learned by consulting the files of old newspapers at the public library that there was a certain periodicity in the fall of frosts. There seemed to him every reason for thinking that early frosts were to be expected and he was anxious to increase his investment in October contracts. It was the greatest opportunity of a lifetime; to lose it was to miss a chance that a wise Providence would hardly again put into his hands.

There was a gleam of excitement in the old man's eyes which Balcomb did not fail to note. He found a pleasure in playing with Ezra Dameron, the hard old reprobate who had always exacted the last ounce of flesh. He quoted again from Doctor Bridges, imputing to that

gentleman sentiments that were original in Balcomb's fertile brain, though none the less noble for being purely fictitious. Balcomb enjoyed his own skill at lying, and it was a high testimony to the promoter's powers that Ezra Dameron believed a good deal that Balcomb told him. When Balcomb mentioned casually that he had been president of the Y. M. C. A. at college the old man's heart warmed to him.

"Well, sir," said Balcomb, presently, after he had given a résumé of one of Doctor Bridges' Easter sermons, "I've been thinking over your proposition about the lots, and I'm sorry—"

The old man's face fell and Balcomb inwardly rejoiced that his victim was so easily played upon.

"—sorry," Balcomb continued, "that I can't do anything in the matter—"

He paused and made a feint of dropping his hat to continue the suspense as long as possible.

"—along the lines you indicated the other day."

"Oh, yes, to be sure! I remember that it was rather a large proposition," said Dameron, recovering himself and smiling in tolerance of Balcomb's failure.

"Yes; the sale of those lots means time and work, and, as I understood you, you wished to avoid both. Well, I don't blame you. I feel myself that I should prefer to have some other fellow tackle the job. These mechanics can't pay more than a hundred or so dollars a year on property. I have friends who went through that in the building associations of blessed memory."

"I don't believe I need any information on 'the subject," said Dameron, indifferently. "If you can't handle the lots—"

"I haven't said that, Mr. Dameron. What I said was that I couldn't do it in the way you indicated. It would take a long time to sell those fifty lots on payments to working people. But I have a better plan. I propose selling them in a bunch."

"Oh!" exclaimed the old man, non-committally, though his face flushed with returning hope.

"Yes. Large bunches are more in my line. But my friends that I may possibly interest can't carry them for their health or yours or mine. You'll have to make a good easy price on them if we do any business. There are only two or three factories in that neighborhood and there may never be any more. And they're getting ready to stick a whole lot of fancy street improvements down there. It may cost a thousand dollars to stop that,"—and Balcomb grinned cheerfully.

"I can't countenance any irregular dealing," said the old man, severely.

"Of course, you can't! You're going to turn that over to me. It isn't regular, but, as the saying is, it's done! You've got to see a man that knows a man that knows another man that has the ear of the Board of Public Works. There's nothing in it to make a Christian gentleman shy. I see only the first man!" And Balcomb laughed his cheerful, easy laugh and stroked his beard.

"Now, Mr. Dameron, I'll give you twenty thousand dollars for those lots as they lie. That's cash."

There was no mistaking the gleam that lighted the old man's eyes.

"Who's your purchaser?" he asked.

"I think I've mentioned to you the Patoka Land and

Improvement Company. We've decided not to confine ourselves to our flat scheme alone. We're going to handle big real estate schemes wherever we see anything good enough and big enough to make it worth while. That wasn't our intention at first, but I've persuaded our people to see it that way. All the big fortunes in this country have been made in real estate, and the possibilities haven't been exhausted yet. If we can hit a fair price, we'll take your lots and work them off in our own way; but I shouldn't bother with the thing at all if it weren't that I hope to get that creek strip from you."

"Who are in your company?" asked the old man. His need for cash was great, but he tried to conceal his anxiety, and he was really curious to know who were behind Balcomb.

The promoter reeled off a long list of names, most of them unknown to Dameron, but Balcomb's ready explanation imparted stability to all of them. There were half a dozen country bankers and a number of men who were or had been state officers.

"You seem to have drawn largely on the country," remarked the old man, dryly.

"You are quite right, I did. It's easier. There's lots of money in these country banks that's crying for investment. I know a lot of business houses right here in our jobbing district that go to the country for their loans. These old Mariona bankers have never got over the panic of seventy-three. Every time they make a loan they make an enemy. A man whose credit is A1 doesn't like to have to go over his past and the history of his wife's relations even unto the third and fourth generation every time he borrows a few thousand dollars. Not much!"

Dameron laughed, a little uneasily, but he laughed. Two years before he would have shuddered at such heresy.

"Well," said Balcomb, rising, "you think over the matter and let me know whether you care to sell. I'll give you one thousand dollars for an option on the creek strip at sixty thousand. I'll see you in a few days."

"No! No!" The old man's voice rose querulously. Delays were dangerous. If Balcomb could do it he must effect the sale at once.

"The figure I named yesterday," began Dameron.

"—is out of the question," said Balcomb, with finality.

"Then nine hundred dollars apiece for the block of lots."

"Perfectly absurd." And Balcomb turned toward the door.

The old man rose and rested against his desk heavily. His bent figure was wholly pitiful; the claw-like fingers on which he leaned trembled so that his thin, worn body shook.

"Suppose you name a figure, Mr. Balcomb," he said, with a pathetic attempt at jauntiness.

"I am authorized to close at twenty thousand cash; and my commission comes out of that. We'll say fifteen hundred commission. But I am not anxious to buy at that price,—it's quite immaterial to me. What I want is the option."

"I have better use for the money; yes, I can use it to advantage," said Dameron, as though he were pondering the matter gravely and seeking to justify himself.

Balcomb took a step toward him.

"In other real estate, by the terms of the trust," he said, smiling in an insinuating way.

"Yes; yes, of course," said Dameron, hastily.

"And there's the order of court."

"To be sure,—there's an order of court required by the terms of the trust. I suppose you wouldn't mind waiting a little for that. The trust expires in a few weeks,—I prefer to go to the judge with the whole settlement at once."

"But you prefer not to go to the judge to ask his approval of this particular deed. All right. The abstract needn't show these requirements,—our attorney will not be particular. I'll fix that for you."

"Yes, you can arrange that, I suppose," said the old man, weakly. He was trembling now, visibly, and his voice shook.

"That will be worth five hundred more,—as special commission and guaranty that you won't forget the court's approval," said Balcomb, coolly.

"No, oh, no!" wailed the old man. "I'm giving it away. You are taking unfair advantage. I am not well—I am not quite myself to-day."

He sank into his chair, breathing hard; but he recovered instantly and smiled at Balcomb with an effort.

"I'm not a man to back out when I have pledged my word," he said grandly. "A trade's a trade." And Balcomb grinned.

"Now, one other thing, Mr. Dameron. I'll be square with you and tell the truth. I've got to have the option on the creek strip. My people are not a bit crazy to buy lots like these, but our apartment scheme is a big thing, and to get your strip of ground out there on the creek

bank we're willing to buy these lots of yours,—just, as the fellow said, to show there's no hard feeling."

"At seventy-five thousand for the creek strip. Not a cent less. It's a part of the trust. It's my daughter's. I shall not give it away. There are only a few weeks more in which I shall have any right to sell,—and—and I have had another offer," he ended weakly.

"Quite likely; but it isn't so easy to get so much cash on short notice. And there's the difficulty of finding other real estate to reinvest the money in, and the order of court and all that."

Balcomb stroked his beard and eyed his prey. He dropped the suggestion about the reinvestment of the proceeds in real estate merely to show his acquaintance with the terms of the trust. It amused him to remember Ezra Dameron's old reputation as a hard customer. He was proving, in Balcomb's own phrase, almost too easy.

"We'll call it twenty thousand, then, for the block of lots," said the old man, smiling and rubbing his hands.

"Very well," said Balcomb, "with two thousand as my fee in the matter; and an option to buy the creek strip at sixty thousand."

The old man stared at him with a sudden malevolent light in his eyes, but he said with exaggerated dignity:

"Very well, Mr. Balcomb."

Dameron drew from his desk an abstract of title covering the Roger Merriam addition. It was in due form, the work of a well-known title company. Balcomb took it and ran his eye through its crisp pages.

"You'll take care of us on this order of court matter if I pass it for the present," said Balcomb.

"I'm a man of my word," declared Ezra Dameron.

So the next afternoon a deed was filed with the county recorder, conveying the block of lots to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company, Ezra Dameron receiving eighteen thousand dollars as consideration and J. Arthur Balcomb two thousand dollars as commission. Opportunities to make two thousand so easily were not to be put aside, and Balcomb's conscience troubled him not at all over the transaction. Van Cleve, the vice-president and attorney, did exactly what Balcomb, the treasurer, told him to do without question; and when Balcomb expressed himself as satisfied that the court's approval would be forthcoming shortly when the whole estate was settled, and that meanwhile the deed should be recorded, Van Cleve readily acquiesced. Balcomb told his associates that it was the only way in which Dameron would give the option.

Balcomb did not, of course, tell his associates that he was accepting a commission from Dameron; for there were times when J. Arthur Balcomb's volubility gave way to reticence of the austere kind. He plumed himself upon at last having secured at sixty thousand dollars an option on the creek strip, where the ideal apartment house was to be built; and he sent notices to his directors of a meeting to consider plans for building. The fact that the company had just bought, through his shrewd agency, something like fifty thousand dollars' worth of lots for twenty thousand would, he told Van Cleve, "look good to the jays," and it did.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AMICABLE INTERVIEWS

The lawyer who never practised reached the Tippecanoe Club every week-day at exactly thirty minutes past twelve o'clock. Within five minutes he had usually taken one sip from a martini cocktail, dry, after which he was ready to discuss the news of the day for ten or fifteen minutes before going to the grill-room for luncheon. A good figure of a man was Copeland. He had steady brown eyes in which a keen humor lurked, and his hair that had once been black was now white; but he was still young and the snowy cap over his dark features was becoming. In a frock coat Copeland would have graced the Senate or the president's cabinet table.

He had telephoned Leighton to meet him one day near the end of September and Morris came in as Copeland finished his cocktail.

"Nothing? You reject my offer? It's better so at your age. When I was in the practice,—"

"That was in the day," said Morris, "when a law library in these parts meant the state decisions, a few text-books and a jug of peach brandy behind the stove. Our Supreme Court has held—"

"Our Supreme Court," began Copeland in his crisp, level tone, "is supreme in nothing so much as in its own stupidity. They have established precedents in torts that

are utterly opposed to the best English decisions. Why, sir—”

Leighton grinned and Copeland changed the subject abruptly. This matter of the idiocy of the Supreme Court was a joke of long standing between Copeland and his friends at the bar. They were forever mailing him catalogues of law books and abstracts of curious decisions from legal periodicals for his edification. He really read law for diversion and enjoyed particularly suits involving the duties and obligations of common carriers.

Copeland, whom Leighton greatly admired, was a man of serious habits and pleasant fancies. He had, for example, a way of whistling when angry or annoyed,—a curiously mournful whistle that was gloomy with foreboding, and heavy with the sorrow of the world. He had begun life as the credit man of the corporation of which he was now president, which may explain his gravity. He was himself the originator of the plausible dictum that the credit man in a refrigerator factory—Copeland’s ice-boxes were sold in twenty states—suffers necessarily from intellectual chilblains. Copeland spoke in a dry, tart way that lent weight to his dicta, whether he was talking at the club or addressing the directors of his company. He was thoroughly self-contained and with emotions that never got out of bounds. About once a month he received and declined an offer of the presidency of some bank or trust company. A business man who is a good fellow, and who, moreover, can say no to his best friend without offense, names his own salary in this golden age of commerce.

Copeland continued to speak with characteristic crispness.

"I have a customer up in the country who has made the acquaintance of your particular friend, Mr. Jack Balcomb. Do you follow me?"

"Your customer must be a man of parts. Balcomb does not cultivate people unless he sees something pretty good in them."

"I believe that is correct. Well, my customer, whose name is Jennings, has bought some stock in what is known as the Patoka Land and Improvement Company, of which Balcomb is treasurer and one thing and another. There's a lawyer up there in his building—"

"Van Cleve," suggested Leighton.

"That's the chap. His eyes look like a bowl of clam broth. He's the attorney for the company. The reason he holds the job is not difficult to determine. His father is a banker down here on the river somewhere and is well-to-do. Balcomb, I understand, is teaching Van Cleve how things are done in large cities."

"He's a competent teacher. Go on."

"Yes; but graduate work is a little stiff for a beginner."

"We needn't take that up now. Where do I come in?"

"Somewhat as follows: A client of your office is also in the game to a certain extent. I refer to Ezra Dameron, that genial, warm-hearted, impulsive old fossil. They tell me on the quiet that he's been monkeying with options. He's selling this company the old Roger Merriam property south of town at half its value and he's given them an option on his strip of land out here on the creek. You know Balcomb's scheme. He's going to build an ideal flat out here at the edge of town,—fountains playing everywhere, roof gardens, native forest

trees,—it's a delightful prospect. Dameron's corner is a great place for it. It makes no difference whether the scheme is practicable or not. Balcomb makes it sound awfully good. It's been written up in the newspapers most seductively. It's so good that only the elect can get in."

"I know Balcomb and his habits of thought. How much is he paying Dameron for that property?"

"Balcomb has an option at sixty thousand. Jennings told me that the stock-holders had already paid in most of their money so that the purchase could be made at once. The price is amazingly low. He must be hard up. Balcomb tells Jennings and the rest of them that he bought those lots merely to be able to get that creek strip; but it's a bargain and they'll make a good thing out of the lots. But what's the matter with Ezra? I thought perhaps Carr's relations with Dameron were such that this information would interest you. The property is part of the Margaret Dameron trusteeship and I hope Miss Dameron will get all she's entitled to. I believe that's the most curious will that was ever probated in our county," Copeland continued, with the exaggerated gravity with which he talked of legal matters. "But that woman certainly had an extraordinary faith in her husband. Nobody else in this township would trust Ezra Dameron round the corner with a hot base-burner. But Mrs. Dameron was as proud as Lucifer. She was a Merriam and she must have thought that by leaving her property to Ezra in trust for their daughter she would put a corner-stone under his honor. But the trusteeship expires on the first of October and the old

man is selling property at a ridiculous figure to a nasty little crook. It looks rather queer, doesn't it?"

"Dameron must have had something of his own; he had his wife's property to play with and if he hasn't done well with it it's his own fault. I'm sorry that he has fallen into Balcomb's hands."

"Oh, well; you can't make a silk purse out of a sardine's tail," observed Copeland, reflectively. "And I fear that Ezra is a sardine."

"Excuse me,"—and Copeland went suddenly to the window and looked out over the tops of the maples in the club yard.

"What are you looking for—an answer in the stars?"

"No; there's a big Chicago jobber in town to-day—sells more ice-boxes than any man in the business, and I was taking note of the weather signs. He's a high sky man. You can't do anything with him on a cloudy day. You see, I'm selling for next year's delivery, and I need a bright sunny day for that chap. A little warmth in the air is a powerful reminder that summer is coming. Of course you *can* sell refrigerators in the dead of winter, but you need a hot room to do it in. We keep our office at a temperature of eighty degrees all winter, so that when we catch a buyer, we create a sort of torrid zone for him. It helps business, but occasionally one dies of pneumonia from subsequent exposure. However, in such cases of mortality our Supreme Court has held—"

"Well, you can file a brief, old man. We have this other business on hand now."

They went in to their luncheon and when they came out

into the club office Copeland scanned the bulletin board as he felt in his pocket for a cigar.

"J. Arthur Balcomb," he read from one of the applications for membership that had just been posted. Then he looked at Leighton.

"Is that your autograph, or is it forged?"

"It's mine. He asked me to indorse for him; and I didn't have the sand to refuse. He's been trying to break in for several years."

"That's all right. I will save you any embarrassment." And Copeland took a penknife from his pocket, and pried out the tacks by which the application was fastened to the board, then folded the paper very carefully into a long strip.

"Ashes to ashes," he said solemnly, and held the paper over the cigar lighter until it flamed. Then he lighted his cigar with it, puffing slowly until the flame crept to his fingers.

"Thank you," said Morris. "It will save me the trouble of speaking to the committee."

When Morris reached his office, he found a first draft of Margaret Dameron's will, written in lead pencil on a faded piece of manila paper, in Carr's small regular hand. Leighton had come upon it once in cleaning out an old desk, and he had put it among his own papers as an interesting specimen of Carr's handiwork. He unfolded the sheets now and examined intently the form of the will. The terms were clear and unequivocal; he noted the change of word and phrase here and there, in every case an improvement in the interest of directness and clarity. There was no question as to the meaning of the will. Real estate was not to be sold ex-

cept by permission of the court; and proceeds were to be reinvested in other realty. There was good sense in the idea, but had Dameron sold the Roger Merriam addition entire to the Patoka Company without referring the sale to the court?

The question must be answered, and he went to the court house and asked permission of the recorder to look at the deed from Ezra Dameron, trustee, to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company. It was in the hands of a clerk for transcribing, but Morris was allowed to examine it. It was written in Dameron's hand, and had been copied from a printed form of trustee's deed. The consideration was twenty thousand dollars, the receipt of which was duly acknowledged. Leighton was a lawyer and he felt a lawyer's disgust with the situation that the case presented. Dameron was clearly in serious need of ready money or he would not be selling real estate at a ridiculous figure. It was also patent that in his necessity he had turned to Balcomb as a man who would not scruple at oblique practices.

Morris went the next day to the office of a title company where he was acquainted and waited while the secretary made up a list of the property held by Ezra Dameron, trustee. He found that the sale of the Roger Merriam addition, which had just been reported, left the creek property, The Beeches and the old Merriam homestead the only realty remaining in the trust.

"I thought Mr. Dameron was a heavy real estate owner," remarked Morris.

"That's a popular superstition," said the secretary; "but he's sold it off rapidly during the past two years. He owns nothing personally, and he has been con-

verting his daughter's property very fast. I hope there's nothing wrong about it."

"I don't know. Are you sure he hasn't been buying other real estate? Something of the kind is required by the terms of his wife's will."

"Not in this county at least." The secretary was silent for a moment. "It would be a delicious irony if Ezra were to turn up broke, wouldn't it?" he said, grinning.

"That depends on the point of view," remarked Morris.

He decided to go direct to Dameron and speak to him of the defect in the deed, more from curiosity as to what the old man would say than with any idea of helping the situation. It was an unwarrantable act on his part, considered professionally or personally; but he justified himself on the score of the old relationship between Carr and Dameron. Carr was out of reach; Leighton did not even know his exact address at this time. And there was old Rodney Merriam, his best friend, and there was Zelda!

Dameron sat at his desk with a mass of papers before him as Leighton entered. The old man wore a serious air, to which the mass of papers contributed. They were in fact merely the outgrowth of his dreams,—his efforts to reduce dreams to tangible problems in mathematics.

A puzzled look crossed Dameron's face as he raised his eyes and regarded Leighton dreamily. Then suddenly, as though just recalling Leighton, he smiled and rose from his chair.

"My dear Mr. Leighton, this is a rare honor; I am delighted to see you, sir."

He had never greeted Leighton so cordially before.

"Pardon me, Mr. Dameron, I have come on an impertinent errand."

"I can't imagine it," said the old man, graciously.

"But I do so on the score of your old friendship with Mr. Carr. He is absent or I should have referred the subject of my errand to him."

"I appreciate your kindness. Pray be seated." The old man sat down, still smiling, and he brought the tips of his fingers together with his characteristic gesture.

"Thank you; but I can't stop. As I said before, my errand is a trifle impertinent. You undoubtedly have your own counsel,—in Mr. Carr's absence."

"Myself! I have enjoyed Mr. Carr's advice through so many years that I feel I have a fair knowledge of the law. We have both,"—and he indicated Morris by a gesture—"we have both enjoyed the instruction of an excellent preceptor," and he bowed over his hands. "Well, sir!"

"I have just happened to learn of a deed given by you to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company for a block of lots lying south of town. Of course, it is a pure oversight, but you neglected to get an order of court, approving the sale. I thought I would mention it to you. It is a sale of some importance. And now I am sure you will pardon me."

Morris turned toward the door, but the old man rose and extended his hand.

"Ah," he began, with a droll air of coquetry, "we

have had the same preceptor! You have a capital eye, Mr. Leighton. I quite admire it in you; and I thank you. I am aware of the provision you indicate. But I have provided for it. The judge is away from home just now and the gentlemen to whom I have sold were anxious to get title without delay. It doesn't look quite regular, I admit. My duties as trustee are nearly at an end. Only a few days more of responsibility. We will make a new deed if necessary,—but the purchaser will be protected. We are all—all honorable men!"

"Very good, sir; I am sorry to have disturbed you,"—and Leighton went out. Dameron's manner had been odd; the old man had frequently spoken to him at home, but usually with cold formality; but his greeting a moment before had been with exuberant cordiality. Morris had never quite made Dameron out, and he was not satisfied with an explanation that the poorest lawyer at the Mariona bar would reject instantly. And the old man had deliberately lied about the absence of the judge of the court, whom Morris had seen but a few hours before.

Morris had often thought of the old man during the past year as of a gray shadow that haunted Zelda Dameron, grim and despicable but inevitably linked to the girl's life. He must save Zelda from the consequences of her father's acts if he could. It was out of the question for him to approach her with a warning against her father; but he would go to her uncle; and he walked directly to Rodney Merriam's house in Seminary Square.

As the door closed on Leighton, Dameron went to an adjoining office and asked a neighbor's errand boy to

carry a note for him. He scrawled a few words bidding Balcomb come to the Dameron Block at once on urgent business.

The bubble that Ezra Dameron had blown upon the air was near the end of its perilous voyage. His dream of corn at a dollar a bushel—a dream wrought of the filmiest shadows—was dispelled. The danger of a great destruction of corn by mid-September frosts had passed. A member of the Chicago firm of brokers through whom he had been trading, had called that day, having paid a visit to Mariona merely to see what manner of man it was who had cast money upon the waters so prodigally, maintaining a fantastic dream of values at the expense of a small fortune.

"This year—this year—the elements were against us, my dear sir; but another year all will be well. There shall be no corn in Egypt," declared Dameron, shaking his head sagely.

And the broker went away mystified, but fully believing that another man had gone mad over the great game. The contracts for October delivery which Ezra Dameron had been carrying had availed him nothing. Throughout the vast areas of the corn belt the security of the golden yield was assured. The crop was enormous; there was no more chance of corn going to a dollar than of the sun and moon reversing their places and functions in the heavens.

Leighton's call had made Dameron uneasy. He had squandered his own property months before; and now Zelda's estate was largely dissipated; and he faced the necessity of rendering an account of his stewardship within a few hours. Leighton undoubtedly knew something of

the transactions by which the real estate held by Ezra Dameron, trustee, had been sold; and if Leighton knew, then Rodney Merriam, who was at home again, would undoubtedly know at once. He must save himself; a plan had formed in his mind by which he could hide his duplicity and put off for a year—perhaps forever—the fact that the greater part of Zelda's property was gone. But first he must get into his own hands the option he had given Balcomb for the sale of the creek strip. The sale had hung fire unexpectedly; but he rejoiced that this property had been saved until the last; he firmly believed that he should ultimately bring back to the empty treasury the money he had thrown away; but while he waited he must study more minutely the conditions that created prices. In a short while, all would be well again; but he must retain his hold upon what remained of Zelda's property. Capital would be necessary for his future operations. The creek strip must be saved and held for a greater price than the option carried.

Balcomb came in looking a trifle annoyed.

"I wish you wouldn't send for me at the busiest hour of my busiest day, Mr. Dameron. I suppose you want to know about the purchase of the creek strip. Well, we're not quite ready to close it to-day. That's a big scheme and all our money isn't paid in yet."

"Then the option,—I must have back the option at once." And the old man spoke in a peremptory tone that was in marked contrast with the mildly insistent note he had of late been using.

"Not at all, sir. That is a thirty-day option and has ten days longer to run."

"To be sure ; but the trust expires to-morrow ; I had no right to bind the estate beyond my trusteeship. To-morrow is my daughter's birthday. My administration of her affairs is ended. I must trouble you to give me the paper."

"Not much, I won't! We've been delayed for a few days ; but you've got to carry out the deal. That was part of the consideration when we took your lots ; and moreover you accepted money on the option. The trusteeship doesn't cut any ice. Of course, your daughter is morally, if not legally, bound by your acts. I can't stop any longer. Before the tenth of October we'll be ready to close, and meanwhile you'll please be good enough to remember that approval of the sale of those lots. Some of these people we're selling to may be silly enough to have the title looked into,—and I don't want any nonsense about it. You remember I fixed all that with my company to please you,—merely to get that option. My own hands are clean, you understand, if anything happens. Good day, Mr. Dameron."

"But wait,—I can't do it ; I must have that option—" began Dameron, and there was a pitiful whine in his voice ; but Balcomb went out and slammed the door.

J. Arthur Balcomb had enjoyed a successful year. Things were running smoothly with him ; he had no doubt in the world that he could enforce his option on the creek strip of land whenever he wished. He knew Zelda Dameron, and he was quite convinced that she was not a girl to avoid obligations incurred by her father.

CHAPTER XXIX

ZELDA FACES A CRISIS

Morris expected Rodney Merriam to manifest wrath and indignation at the recital of Ezra Dameron's ill-doing, but the old gentleman in Seminary Square listened in silence, and at the end, with something more than his usual urbanity, asked Morris to have a cigar. He filled a cob pipe for himself, however, and this was always a sign, Morris had observed, of inward perturbation.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked Merriam, presently.

"That's the rub—there's not much of anything that you can do. The trust is a wide-open thing. He isn't required to report to anybody and he gives no bond; but he must get the court's approval before he sells anything; and then he must reinvest the money in other realty. It is significant that he has been selling at desperate prices toward the end of his trusteeship. He must be hard up."

Merriam had never spoken of his brother-in-law to Leighton except in terms of respect, and he hesitated now.

"My sister's idea in making that will," he began quietly, "was to deal generously with a blackguard. It was her pride. She had made a mistake."

He paused and the blood rushed to his face. He was checking his wrath with difficulty.

"He had ruined her life. We were all opposed to her marrying Ezra Dameron; but she was not a child, but a grown woman. She left her property to Zelda through him; and she wouldn't admit to the rest of us, even at the end, that she did not trust him. She doubtless thought his avarice would protect her child."

He blurted this out fiercely, with a certain shame-facedness, and then paused abruptly and stared at Leighton. Why, he asked himself, was he speaking thus to the son of Morris Leighton!

The situation angered him and his wrath kindled again as his memory swept the past; but he controlled himself, and bent forward in his chair.

"Morris, I'm not at all surprised or disappointed in him. I have never, at any time since Zee came home, had the slightest idea that her father would ever be able to turn over her property. I've been curious to know just what excuse he would offer for failing to settle on the day appointed. And I have hoped that he would fail,—that's the truth about it. I have hoped that if he were to prove himself a thief I might get Zee to leave him. It hasn't, perhaps, been creditable to my sense of Christian duty that I have felt so; but I have wanted to get that reptile at my mercy. I should like to show him mercy; it would be a revenge worth living for,—to be merciful to that ugly hypocrite. Now, just what has Ezra been doing?"

And as the old man relighted his pipe, its bowl spurted angry flashes.

"He's been speculating in one thing and another. I don't know to what extent, but that's what Copeland

tells me. He has a way of knowing things, you know. It was he that told me of the sale of those lots."

Merriam threw back his head and laughed in a very disagreeable way.

"A gambler! Ezra a gambler! Well, I'll be damned! I suppose, Morris, that where a doctor knows that a man has inherited some sort of poison that lies dormant in the blood, he constantly expects it to manifest itself. He can't tell just how it will break out, but he knows that it will come; and some day he sees the first signs of it, probably with a satisfaction in the thought that the business of nature proceeds so inexorably. That's the way I have felt about Ezra Dameron. I knew the yellow streak was in him and that it would show up some day; but I'll be damned if I thought the bucket shops would get him." And Rodney Merriam laughed again in a way that made Leighton uncomfortable.

"Now, Morris, if you have anything to propose, we'll consider it."

"As near as I can make out, all the property that Mr. Dameron will be able to turn over to his daughter will be the farm out here and the old homestead and the creek property. He sold the Dameron Block about two months ago. He has sold the original holdings and he has not bought any other real property with the money, as the will provided. There is, you know, no penalty for a non-performance of the obligations of the trust. His needs have undoubtedly grown quite recently, for he has been doing business with Balcomb,—fooling away the property. Maybe he's insane!"

"Don't be a fool; he's sane enough; he's a thief, that's all!" declared Rodney, irascibly.

"If Miss Dameron wished to take advantage of her rights she might have this last sale set aside. I will undertake to do that."

"And a nice lot of publicity we'd get out of it, too. No, sir, we won't do that sort of business. My family has lived in this town a good many years; and some of us have been fools, and some of us have failed; but Zelda has the right key. She's pitched it pretty high; but we'll keep it at the same note, if we can. How much did he get for those lots?"

"Twenty thousand dollars; but no doubt my friend Balcomb kept a handsome commission. I'll rather enjoy settling with him."

"He's one of the jewels produced by our college, isn't he?"

"He was the bright particular star of my class. He was well fitted by nature to be a clerk in a rural general store, or more likely, a barker for a circus side-show or the advance agent for a hair tonic. His education ruined him. He has the smooth facility of the superficial mind, —even showed some literary gift, and wrote the best essays in the class."

"I know the type. A short horse, soon curried."

"There's the option on that piece of ground out on the creek. It might possibly be binding on Miss Dameron after the trusteeship has been closed. Balcomb's pretty smooth, and if the old man is in straits, you can't tell what he'll do."

"Let him blow it all in, Morris. I shall be disappointed if there's a cent left. He can have the money. I want the girl!"

"Balcomb is undoubtedly swindling his associates in



Rodney Merriam

the land company; they are quite likely to squeal. Balcomb wouldn't hesitate about throwing the blame for any irregularity on Dameron."

"Let him do it. What do we care for Dameron!"

"But I thought you wanted to avoid a scandal, for Miss Dameron's sake,—for all your sakes."

"Yes; to be sure," responded Merriam, more tamely. "Balcomb's pretty crooked, I've no doubt, but he couldn't have taught Ezra Dameron any cussedness. You needn't try to mitigate this thing."

"You know I'm not trying to. I want to do the best thing and the right thing. You are not anxious for publicity."

"Most certainly not."

"We've got to approach Miss Dameron, and tell her the whole matter. It is not a pleasant thing to do, but if we get her help—if that should seem the best way—"

They were deeply engrossed and did not hear the bell or the Japanese boy opening the front door.

"Uncle Rodney!"

Both men sprang to their feet. Zelda stood in the library door.

"Glad to see you, Zee," said her uncle, quietly.

She looked from one to the other and nodded to Morris.

"You don't look so awfully glad, I must say. If I've come in upon a conspiracy I'll take myself off. The gloom here is so thick you could grow mushrooms in it."

"I'm glad you happened in, Zee. There's something I wish to speak to you about. We may as well discuss it now; and if it's agreeable to you, I should like Mr.

Leighton to stay. It's a legal matter that we may want him to advise us about."

"You have a serious air. I hope you haven't been breaking any laws, you two. Certainly, Mr. Leighton may stay."

"Sit down, Morris," said Merriam, deliberately.

Zelda had taken a chair in the corner away from the smoldering fire, and Merriam found the chair that he liked least, with an unformed idea that such self-immolation fitted him better for an unpleasant task. He did not begin immediately, and while he collected his thoughts Zelda watched him with amusement.

"If you knew how funny you look, Uncle Rodney, I'm sure you'd laugh. And you seem a little ultra-serious, too, Mr. Leighton. Please, uncle, don't scold me!"

"Yes. Yes, to be sure," said Merriam, absent-mindedly, and Leighton and Zelda exchanged a smile.

"I want to speak to you about your property. There are some things connected with your affairs that you must know."

"But father attends to everything—you'll certainly waste your talents on me. Do let us talk of something cheerful."

But her uncle went on now, and she listened attentively.

"You know that your property, what your mother had and wished to give to you, was left in trust. Your father is the trustee."

"Yes, I know that."

She bent forward in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap. She was wholly composed and heedful.

"Your father's powers have been absolute. He is not

required to give an accounting to any one—except, of course, to you, when he turns over the property on your birthday—that is, to-morrow.”

“Yes, I believe to-morrow is the first of October. I understand perfectly that mother wished me to know that she trusted father,—as she expected me to trust him. That is all very simple.”

There was a little sting in this, as though she knew what was coming and wished to warn her uncle to desist. He shot a sharp glance at the girl from his black eyes and went on, patiently and kindly.

“That is all very well. Everything was left to your father’s discretion, but there were a few minor requirements. In case he should sell real estate, he was to get the approval of the court; and he was to buy other real estate with whatever he realized.”

“That’s probably important, but not amusing. I really dropped in to ask what you were going to give me for my birthday. I’m almost sorry I came.”

“Your father has sold some of the real estate—”

“Of course. You escape a lot of trouble by not having real estate, so father says,—taxes and all that. But once more, pardon me!”

The color was dying out of her face and she twisted her fingers together nervously. Her heart was beating fiercely. It had come at last,—this hour in which she must face an attack upon her father. She had known that it would come, and she knew that she should meet it. It angered her that the terms her uncle used were unfamiliar. Law and business were unknown worlds to her. She again followed her uncle’s recital closely; he was speaking with a sharp precision that he had never used before in talking to her.

"Your father has sold a great deal of your property," he repeated; "and it appears that through neglect,"—he hesitated—"or forgetfulness, the court's approval was not secured in at least one case. Of course, this can be corrected."

He waited, to study his ground a little, and he glanced at Leighton, as though to make sure that the young man had not deserted him.

"Father is a little forgetful sometimes," said Zelda. "He isn't a young man, you must remember." The sympathy with which she spoke made Merriam uncomfortable; and Leighton moved uneasily. It was not a pleasant task,—that of telling a young woman that her father was a rascal.

"But while the order of court can be procured and injury to the purchaser prevented, there is another side of the matter that we must consider."

"Yes, uncle,"—and she smiled a little forlornly. She knew that she should meet the blow bravely when it fell; but it hurt her now to feel her uncle's kindness.

"It hurts me,—Zelda, it hurts me more than I can tell you, to have to say that all is not quite clear about this transaction. Your father has sold at an extraordinary price. I fear that he is in difficulties. In this real estate matter you have your remedy. It is of this that I wish to speak particularly. It is only right that I should protect you if I can."

"You are very kind; you are always good to me, Uncle Rodney."

"The failure to get the court's approval of the sale of the real estate makes it possible for us to save it—this one piece, maybe, though nearly all the rest is gone—to

get it back, perhaps. The situation is not agreeable. Your father received the money and I am afraid he has made—at least we are led to suspect—that he has made—ill use of it. But we may find it possible to set this sale aside, or get an additional sum from the purchaser,—”

Merriam was looking intently at the floor as he spoke these sentences. He was aware suddenly that Zelda had risen and crossed the room until she stood before him, with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes. He unconsciously rose and drew away from her. It seemed to Leighton that the air in the room grew tense. The girl stood between the two men, her lips parted, one hand on the back of a chair.

“Uncle Rodney, I never thought that you would—insult me—in your own house—under the pretense of kindness! I should like to know what you gentlemen mean, and what you think I am—that I should listen to such things from you! To think that I should be willing to take advantage of the law to defraud some one, on the theory that my father was defrauding me—stealing from me, I suppose you mean!”

“Zee, one moment—”

“No, sir! I shall hear no more from you. I never want to see you again,—either of you!” She had spoken brokenly, and the last three words came slowly, with a kind of hiss. “But before I go, I wish to say something to you, to ease your feelings of pity for me. It was by my request—and by my order—that father sold that property; and he gave *me* the money—do you understand?—gave *me* the money for it—and I have spent it—*all of it!*”

She was gone so quickly that the front door slammed on her last word, as though to add to the contempt that it carried.

Merriam ran into the hall, calling her name, but when he opened the door the iron gate was swinging violently, and she was walking rapidly away. Leighton seized his coat and hat in the hall and sped after her.

"Bring her back!" the old man roared after him.

"Miss Dameron, I'm sorry: I am sure—"

"Will you kindly stop following me?" she said, wheeling upon Morris, and then she turned and continued her flight; but Morris followed. Zelda continued straight ahead and did not look back or speak to him again, though she knew that he was behind her.

She continued up High Street to a cross-town thoroughfare that led to the old Merriam house. There was something wholly uncompromising in her walk; and her spirit, Morris declared to himself, was equally unyielding. Her assumption of responsibility for her father's acts had amazed him, and in the cool air of the autumn evening he debated with himself as to how much, if anything, she really knew of Ezra Dameron's affairs. It was a fine thing for her to have swept aside her uncle's charges, and her words repeated themselves over and over again in his mind with thrilling effect. If it was merely a blind defense, to give her time for thought or inquiry, she had managed it with amazing dash.

When she reached the old house, Zelda ran up the steps, and pulled the bell. She did not turn her head, but Leighton stood, feeling the least bit foolish, until the door opened and Zelda disappeared within.

CHAPTER XXX

“I WISH YOU WOULD NOT LIE TO ME”

Zelda had carried in her heart for weeks the fear of some such disclosure as that which she had just heard from her uncle. In her ignorance of business, she had not even vaguely guessed what had taken so strong a hold upon her father. He had acted strangely during the long summer, but she had attributed his vagaries to the infirmity of years. His curious conduct in the country the night she met him with Pollock had troubled her greatly, but she had spoken of it to no one. He had seemed himself again. He had, indeed, treated her with something more than his habitual deference since their return to town.

Zelda went at once to the living-room where her father usually sat with his newspaper at this hour, but he had not come home; and she went up to her own room, glad of a respite. She had acted her part so long; she had defended him in her own heart and by her own acts; she had even sought to clothe him in her thoughts with something of the dignity, the nobility even, of honorable age; but this was now at an end. It was clear that a crisis had been reached; and while the purely business aspect of the situation did not trouble her at all, she felt that her relations with her father

could never again be the same. She had been shielding him, not only from the contempt of her kindred, but from her own distrust as well; and now that this was at an end, she went slowly to her room with a new feeling of isolation in her heart.

She made a light and put aside her hat and coat with the studied care that we give to little things in our perplexities. Then she unlocked the drawer of her desk in which she kept her mother's book. It opened at the page that had meant so much to her, that had been her guide and her command, and she pondered the sentences anew. When she heard her father come in she went down in her street dress, with the little book in her pocket, slowly and with no plan formed.

Dameron was on his knees before the living-room fire, and he started slightly when he heard her step.

"It's much cooler, Zee. We came in from the country just in time."

"Yes, it is chilly to-night. It must be nearly time for heavy frosts."

"Frost? Yes; it is time for a great frost. Yes; a deadly frost is due. I am watching it; I am watching it,"—and he seemed to forget himself for a moment and she looked at him wonderingly, not knowing what he meant.

He stood with his back to the flame, his hands behind him, and regarded Zelda warily, in a way that had grown habitual of late.

"Where have you been, Zee?" he asked.

"I went down to Zimmer's to look at some pictures they are showing there; and on my way home I stopped at Uncle Rodney's."

"Ah, yes; your Uncle Rodney. I haven't seen him since he came home. I trust he's quite well."

"Yes; he's always well."

"I believe that is so; but the life he has led is conducive to a tranquil old age. He has led a life of ease, with no responsibilities."

This was Dameron's usual attitude toward his brother-in-law; there was nothing to be gained by defending her uncle, and Zelda turned the conversation into other channels. She had enjoyed her summer in many ways and to mention the farm was always to give her father pleasure. He followed her talk with relief. He saw with satisfaction that she was simply dressed; he was afraid of her when she came to the table arrayed in splendor, as she sometimes did, quite unaccountably.

He did not seek the evening paper with his wonted eagerness when they returned to the sitting-room after dinner, but continued talking.

"There are some business matters that I should like to speak of to-night, Zee."

"Very well, father."

"I have deferred this as long as possible, feeling that you would not care to be troubled about business—even your own. I fully sympathize with a woman's dislike of it."

He had brought his fingers to their apex and was speaking in a pleasant, conciliatory tone.

"I'm sure I have no wish to learn business, father."

"Quite right; you are a wise girl, Zee. A home-keeping heart is best for a woman. One of our ministers was asked, many years ago, what he thought of the movement for the emancipation of women. And

he said that his answer would be the answer of Abraham when the Lord asked him where Sara was,—‘Behold, in the tent.’”

“I suppose the tent may have been a little lonely at times,” suggested Zelda; and Dameron smiled and rubbed his hands.

“As to your own affairs, the trusteeship established by your dear mother is nearly at an end. It expires by the limitations of your mother’s will on your twenty-first birthday, that is, to-morrow.”

“Yes; I believe that is so.”

He looked at her quickly; he found her composure disquieting. Perhaps Rodney Merriam had been giving her counsel!

“As we have just said,—and I was glad to find you agreeing with me,—a woman does well to let business alone. There is an immense amount of detail connected with an estate,—even a comparatively small one, like your mother’s. There are many accounts to keep. I have kept them for years in my own way. I am not an expert accountant, but I hope that my work is accurate. At any time that you would like to examine the books, I should be glad to aid you,—”

“Thank you,—yes, of course,” said Zelda, hurriedly. She had been thinking of other things; but she now fixed her attention upon what her father was saying.

“I have thought, Zee, that perhaps you would like to continue this trusteeship. No one else understands the nature of the property so well as I. I have given the best years of my life to studying it. The burden is a considerable one for my years. I am nearing seventy; nearing the three-score and ten of the scriptural allot-

ment,—but if you would like to have me go on, I should be willing to do so. Your dear mother gave me her entire confidence; it would please me if I could feel that your own trust in me was equally great."

His appeal to her mother's memory sickened her. She must have a little time to consider. She saw no reason for haste in perfecting this new arrangement, and she resolved to do nothing without consulting her uncle.

"I suppose there is no hurry about it, father. It would be just as well for me to go over the whole matter at the time of the change." She spoke carelessly, but a bitterness had begun to creep into her heart. The contempt that she had smothered for a year now ceased to be a smoldering ember and leaped into flame.

"I wished to propose that myself," he replied, smiling. "And I will tell you now what I had expected to conceal until your birthday, of a little gift I am making you. I have placed two thousand dollars to your credit at the bank. It is subject to your check. It is from my own estate, of course. I should hardly make you a present of your own money."

He rose and paused for a moment, smiling down on her, and she lifted her eyes to his.

"You are very kind; it is a handsome gift; but I think we'd better put it into the new trusteeship. Then I shall not be tempted into extravagances."

He had expected some exuberant expression of pleasure; but she had spoken coldly, and her manner troubled him. He took from the table a brown paper parcel and opened it, carefully untying the knot in the tape which had fastened it.

"I think you have never seen a copy of your mother's will, Zee,—unless perhaps your Uncle Rodney has shown it to you."

"No; I have never seen it," she answered.

He unfolded a copy of the last will and testament of Margaret Dameron carefully, and then refolded it lengthwise to remove the creases for greater convenience in examining it. He proceeded with an exaggerated deliberation. A man likes to mystify a woman about business matters; his own wisdom grows refulgent in the dark recesses of her ignorance.

"You had better ask the maid to excuse you if any one calls."

She went to the kitchen and spoke to Polly. The telephone was on the second floor, and she pondered a moment as to whether she should not call her uncle. She prolonged her visit to the kitchen, talking to the colored woman to give herself time to think. She had grown fond of Polly and felt a grateful security in the knowledge that the woman was in the house.

Dameron read his wife's will through, and Zelda listened attentively, though few of the terms meant anything to her, and the numbers of lots and the names of additions, divisions and subdivisions were only rigmarole. Her father paused now and then to make some comment on an item, explaining more fully what was meant.

Either her uncle had deceived her or her father was lying; and she knew that her uncle had told the truth. The situation cleared for her slowly. His request for a continuation of the trusteeship veiled his wish to keep

her affairs in his own hands, without a break. It was a clever plan and in an impersonal way she admired his audacity.

"You understand," her father continued, "that the personal property—that means stocks, bonds and so on—was to be sold and the proceeds reinvested as I saw fit. It was necessary to change most of it—I had no option in the matter. Your grandfather, Zee, had been one of the early railroad builders in this part of the country, and the original small independent lines have all been merged into great systems. It should be a matter of pride to you that your grandfather was a man so far-seeing and progressive. But now, his children and their children derive the benefit. I recall,"—he dropped his paper and looked at Zelda with a reminiscential air—"I recall that a representative in Congress from our state was defeated for reelection back in the forties for voting an appropriation to aid Morse in his experiments with the telegraph. They charged him with wasting the people's money. But times change, and men change with them!"

He sighed, and the thin leaves of his copy of the will rustled in his fingers as he sought the place where he had dropped his reading. He lingered over the words that described the nature of the trust. They were very sweet to him, because they were at once a justification of himself and a refutation of the slanders of his wife's family. He knew, too, that they gave emphasis to the suggestion that he was now making to Zelda, that she renew the trusteeship. He wished to put this as much as possible in the light of a favor to the girl.

"I am very sorry that my friend and counsel, Mr. Carr, is absent, as I should like to have him prepare the new deed of trust. He is a man of the highest probity. He is the ablest lawyer at our bar. You understand that."

"Yes; I know that he is a very able man."

His joy in the knowledge that Michael Carr was far away in Italy at this moment did not compensate for his anxiety at Zelda's seeming indifference. But he must not falter; he could not afford to lose now. He continued with increasing deliberation.

"In Mr. Carr's absence I have not thought it wise to take another attorney into our confidence. I have prepared a deed of trust myself. I copied from some of the best models. Such deeds are rather common nowadays and I have consulted a number, the work of sound lawyers, that are on record in our county offices. I have enumerated all the property that is set forth in your mother's will, with the difference that I have given proper designations to items that have changed in the natural course of things. Shall I read the deed?"

"Yes, please," said Zelda. "I should like to hear it."

He had, as he said, copied the form of a trust deed that was well-known among local lawyers. As a trust deed it was absolutely above reproach, save only that neither the property as described nor any equivalent for the bulk of it was any longer in existence as a part of the estate of Margaret Merriam Dameron.

Zelda sat inert, listening to the recital, as her father read with deliberation and with due regard for the sonorous legal phrases. He even read through the notarial certificate; and then he drew off his glasses and

settled back in his chair with a satisfied air. He hoped that Zelda would discuss some of the provisions, or ask questions, so that he might be assured that she suspected nothing.

"No doubt it all sounds very tedious to you, Zee, dear. But these things are necessary. I have carefully weighed every word in that deed. Its provisions are wise,—very wise, and safeguard the interests of the beneficiary very strongly. Yes; it is an excellent piece of work,—but of course I take no credit for it. I have merely given you the benefit of the work of others,—all very competent men."

Zelda said nothing. He rose and fumbled with the pen and ink that lay on the table by the inkstand, while he waited for her to speak. The silence grew oppressive; the girl had always responded quickly in their talk. He turned, holding the pen in his hand.

"I suggest that you look the paper over before signing, Zee."

He held the paper toward her, but she shook her head.

"Very well. I have read it to you carefully; and you can, of course, have a copy at any time. It is perfectly proper for you to sign to-night,—the day before your birthday; you can acknowledge it before a notary to-morrow."

He was smiling, but he held the pen toward her with a hand that shook perceptibly.

Repulsion and pity struggled for the mastery as she pondered, looking away from him into the fire. She felt that she could never meet his eyes again; but she seemed to see them in the flames, the small gray

eyes that were so full of cunning and avarice. It was his deceit, his effort to play upon her credulity, that stung her now into a fierce contempt. She rose and turned toward him.

"I wish you would not lie to me, Ezra Dameron," she said quietly, with even the suggestion of a caress upon the syllables of his name.

CHAPTER XXXI

FACE TO FACE

The room was very still after she had spoken. Her father did not start or look directly at her, but, after an interval of silence, he lifted his eyes slowly until they met hers.

"You have lied to me," Zelda repeated in the same passionless voice, speaking as though she were saying some commonplace thing. "I understand perfectly well why you wish to continue this trusteeship. I shall be very glad to do what you ask; only we must understand each other frankly. You must tell me the truth."

He shrank down slowly into his chair, but his eyes did not leave her face. His hands had ceased trembling, and he was quite himself.

"You don't know,—you can't know the enormity of what you are saying, Zee. It must be some horrible joke." He drew his hand across his eyes as though to dispel a vision. "I have dealt with you generously, considerately,—and this—you can not mean what you say."

He waited as though he expected some word of contrition; but she still stood with her eyes fastened on him, and there was no kindness in them.

"I have sought your own good. I have supposed you would be gratified to continue—the trust—reposed in me—by your mother."

"If you speak to me of my mother again I shall find some way of punishing you," she said, and there was still no passion in her voice.

"I suppose that when you are ready you will tell me what this means—why you have turned against me in this way," he began with a simulation of anger. And then changing to a conciliatory tone: "Tell me what it is that troubles you, Zee. I had hoped that you were very happy here. I had flattered myself through the summer that ours was a happy home. But if there is any way in which I have erred I am heartily sorry."

He bowed his head as though from the weight of his penitence, but he was glad to escape her eyes. When he looked up again, he found her gaze still bent upon him. He picked up the fallen pen and placed it on the table beside the paper which he had asked her to sign.

"You are a tremendous fraud," she said, with a smile in which there was no mirth or pity. "You are immensely clever, and I suppose that because I have some of your evil blood in me, I am a little bit clever, too."

He rose in real anger and cried hoarsely:

"Zee! You forget yourself; you must be mad!"

"I am growing sane," she answered. "I have been mad for a year, but my reason has come back to me. I do not forget myself or that you are my father; but I remember, too, that you are an evil man and that you drove my mother into her grave. You killed her, with your pettiness and your hypocrisy; you are just as

much her murderer as though you had slain her with a knife. But I beg of you, do not think that you can play the same tactics with me. I don't ask for the money that you have squandered. It isn't your being a thief that I hate; it's your failure to be a man! It's the thought that you would betray the trust of the dead—of my dead mother—that's what I hate you for!"

He took a step toward her menacingly.

"You are either a fool or mad. You shall not talk to me so! You have been listening to lies—infamous lies. Rodney Merriam has been poisoning your mind against me. I shall hold him responsible; I shall make him suffer. He has gone too far, too far. I shall have the law upon him."

She had rested her arm on the mantel-shelf, and she now leaned upon it, but did not draw away from him as his eyes blazed into hers.

"You had better sit down," she said without flinching. "I suppose you used to talk to my mother this way and that you succeeded in frightening her. But I am not afraid of you, Ezra Dameron. If you think you can browbeat me into signing your deed, you have mistaken me. I was never less scared in my life."

When she spoke his name it slipped from her tongue lingeringly, and fell upon him like a lash. In addressing him so, she cast off the idea of kinship utterly; there was no tie of blood between them; and he was simply a mean old man, despicable and contemptible, standing on the brink of a pit that he had dug for himself, and feeling the earth crumbling beneath his feet.

She went on, with no break in the impersonal tone to which her words had been pitched in the beginning.

"You have so little sense of honor,—you are so utterly devoid of anything that approaches honor and decency,—the hypocrisy in you is so deep, that you can't imagine that a man like my uncle would never seek to prejudice me against you—my own father. Neither my uncle nor my aunt has ever said a single unkind word to me of you. My aunt asked me to go to live with her when we came home; but I refused to do it. And I'm glad I did. This closer acquaintance has given me an opportunity that was—in one of your hypocritical phrases—quite providential, of learning you as though you were a child's primer. You have been a very bitter lesson, Ezra Dameron! My mother never rebelled, never lifted her voice against you, and you supposed I should prove quite as easy; but you see how mistaken you are!"

"This is a game—a plot to trap me. But it shall fail. My own child shall not mock me."

His old eyes gleamed angrily and his bent shoulders straightened; but his hands were tremulous. He rested one of them on the mantel and drew close to her again; but she went on relentlessly.

"Please sit down. I have something more to say to you. I have gone over it in my heart a thousand times in this year of deceit. I believe I have grown a good deal like you. It has been a positive pleasure for me to act a part,—shielding you from the eyes of people who were anxious for a breach between us. I know as I walk the streets and people say, 'There is Ezra Dameron's daughter,' that they all pity me. They have expected me to leave you. They have wondered that I should go on living with you when every child in the

community sneers at the sight of you or the mention of your name."

"Shame on you! Shame on you! This is beyond the pardon of God!"

"I suppose it is a shameless thing to be saying to you; but I haven't finished yet. And you had better sit down. You are an old man and I respect your years even though you are Ezra Dameron."

His hand that lay on the mantel was trembling so that it beat the black slate shelf uncontrollably. She waited, with the patience of a parent in dealing with an erring child, until he turned and sat down.

"There *was* some one that told me—that warned me against you. I had hoped that it would never be necessary to tell you; but it gives me a keener happiness than I dare try to express to tell you now."

"Yes; yes; some liar,—an infamous liar," he muttered, and he looked at her with a sudden hope in his face. When he should learn who had come between him and this girl he would exhaust the possibilities of revenge.

Zelda read the meaning of his look and she smiled a little, and stepped to the table and turned up the lamp, and put his glasses within reach of his hand.

"I shall not trust myself to tell you. I shall let you read for yourself a few words, written by one who was not a liar."

He watched her as she drew out the little red book, her talisman and her guide. He turned it over curiously and then read, at the place where she had opened:

*"They have told me to-day that I am going to die; but I have known it for a long time. * * * Do*

*for her what you would have done for me. Do not let him kill the sweetness and gentleness in her. Keep her away from him if you can; but do not let her know what I have suffered from him. I have arranged for him to care for the property I have to leave her, so that she may never feel that I did not trust him. He will surely guard what belongs to her safely. * * * Perhaps I was unjust to him; it may have been my fault; but if she can respect or love him I wish it to be so."*

"You see there is no question of lying here. I found this—in a trunk of mother's, in the garret—quite accidentally, a few days after I came home. It was intended for Uncle Rodney or Aunt Julia and not for me."

He was silent for a moment, staring at the page before him and refusing to meet her eyes.

She sat down and watched him across the table. Suddenly he laughed shrilly, and slapped his hands together in glee.

"I might have known it; I might have known it! This is delightful; this is rich beyond anything!" His mirth increased, and he rocked back and forth, chuckling and beating his knees with his hands.

"Zee, Zee, my child," he began amiably; "I am glad this has happened. I am glad that there is an opportunity for me to right myself in your eyes. I could not have asked anything better."

He began to nod his head as was his way when pleased by the thought of something he was about to say.

"Zee, the animus of this is clear. Your mother hated me,—"

"You needn't tell me that! Her own testimony is enough, pitiful enough."

"But the reason, the reason! I should never have told you. I have hoped to keep it in my own bosom,—my lifelong shame and grief. But your mother, your mother played me a base trick, the basest a woman can play. She married me, loving another man. And I suffered, O God, how I suffered for it!"

He lifted his head and raised his hands to heaven.

A sob leaped in her throat and tears sprang in her eyes as she rose and bent toward him over the table.

"If you mention her again I shall punish you, Ezra Dameron."

He did not heed her, but began speaking with a haste his tongue had rarely known. The smile that forever haunted his lips vanished.

"She loved another man when she married me. I knew it well enough; but I was glad to marry her on any terms. She was a beautiful woman,—a very beautiful woman;" and the anger died suddenly from his eyes and voice. Zelda wondered whether he was really touched by the thought of her mother or whether the little flame of passion had merely burned out. As he continued speaking she listened, as though he had been an actor impersonating a part, and doing it ill, so that he presented no illusion to her eyes. She was thinking, too, of her own future; of the morrow in which she must plan her life anew. She thought of Morris Leighton now, and with an intenseness that made her start when her father spoke his name.

"You have been a better daughter to me than I could have asked. An inscrutable Providence has ordered things strangely, but—" and he chuckled and wagged his head, "but,—very wisely and satisfactorily. I suppose your Uncle Rodney thought a marriage between you and his young friend Leighton would be an admirable arrangement; but you have done as I would have you do in rejecting him. Ah, I understood,—I was watching you—I knew that you were leading him on to destroy him."

"I should like to know what right you have to speak to me of such a matter in such a tone. He is a gentleman."

"He is; he is, indeed;" and Dameron laughed harshly. "He is a gentleman beyond any doubt; but you refused him, just as I knew you would. The force of heredity is very strong. You are a dutiful daughter; you even anticipated my wishes. Your conduct is exemplary. I am delighted."

"I think you are mad," said Zelda, looking at him wonderingly. She had begun to feel the strain of events of the few hours since she had gone to her uncle's house; she was utterly weary and her father's strange manner had awakened a fear in her. Perhaps he was really mad. She walked toward the door; but he was timing his climax with a shrewd cunning.

"When your mother was engaged to Morris Leighton, the elder,"—and he paused, knowing that she had turned quickly and was staring at him with wonder and dread in her eyes,—“when your mother was engaged to this young man's father,” he repeated, “your uncle was greatly pleased. But she was not so easily caught!”

"You ought to know that I believe nothing you say, —not a word!" But in her heart she felt a foreboding that this might be true.

"You should ask your uncle; or your Aunt Julia. Possibly we three are the only people that remember. I should like to have you quite sure about it, now that you have decided not to marry the son,"—and he laughed with ugly glee.

The front door-bell rang out harshly, and the old man sprang up:

"You are not at home; you must see no one."

Polly's step was heard in the back hall.

"Never mind, Polly. I'll answer the door," said Zelda. The sight of any other face than that of her father would be a relief; but it was nine o'clock, an hour at which no one ever called. She expected nothing more than a brief parley with a messenger boy.

"Pardon me, Miss Dameron—"

Leighton stood on the step with his hat in his hand. He had been wandering about the streets since he left her, afraid to return to report to Rodney Merriam. He had passed the Dameron house a dozen times, held to the neighborhood by a feeling that Zelda might need his protection; and he finally stopped and rang in a tumult of hope that he might see her again and reassure himself of her safety. As he stepped into the hall, he saw Ezra Dameron peering at him from the living-room door.

"Good evening, Mr. Dameron," said Leighton. The old man turned back to the table and his papers without reply; but he listened intently.

"I was passing," said Leighton, truthfully, "and I remembered a message that Mrs. Copeland gave me for you this afternoon, and I'm sorry to say I forgot about it until now."

He looked at her, smiling; she understood well enough why he had come.

"Please put off your coat and come in. We are alone, father and I, having a quiet evening at home!"

"Thank you; I can't stop; but Mrs. Copeland wished me to ask you to come in to-morrow afternoon. She has an unexpected guest,—a friend from Boston,—and you know she likes everybody to appreciate her friends!"

"Thank you, very much. I shall come if I possibly can."

She knew that Mrs. Copeland had intrusted Leighton with no such message, for she was on telephonic terms with Zelda, and Morris Leighton was of rather heroic proportions for an errand boy.

"Mrs. Copeland would never forgive me if I forgot," said Morris, wishing to prolong his moment at the door.

"I shall come if I can," said Zelda, raising her voice slightly, so that her father might hear.

"And I apologize again for disturbing you. But I feared Mrs. Copeland's wrath," and Morris grinned rather foolishly.

"You are a faithful messenger, and I thank you very much," said Zelda, formally; but when the door closed on him and she heard his step on the walk the tears sprang to her eyes in her joy at the thought that he had remembered!

When she went back to her father he was poring over his papers at the table.

"It was that Leighton fellow," he said, looking up.

"Yes; it was Mr. Leighton," said Zelda.

"I don't like him," said Dameron, sharply.

"I'm very sorry," said Zelda.

"I don't like him," the old man repeated; and he did not raise his eyes, but kept them upon the papers.

"What dreadful liars we are, you and I, Ezra Dameron," she said, going back to her old post by the mantel.

"You have used language to me that is infamous, blasphemous, from a child to a father."

"Very likely," she said; "but I can't discuss these things with you any further."

Leighton's appearance had broken the spell; it had given her new courage and assurance, though it had not lifted the burden from her heart. Her father was loath to part with her; there was the extension of the trusteeship to be effected; he was about to make an appeal to her, to throw himself on her mercy, when she said, half-turning to go:

"You need not be afraid—I will sign your deed. And I have not the slightest idea of holding you to account for any of your acts. Only,—only,"—and her eyes filled and her voice broke,—“only you must never speak my mother's name to me again!"

"Yes; yes; I understand," he said absently; though it was clear that he did not know what she meant.

She turned and looked at him musingly, with a composure that was complete; but a barrier in her heart broke down suddenly.

"My girlhood, the beautiful ignorance of life, has

all gone now. It began to go as soon as I came home to live with you; but I wish—I wish—it had not gone—so wretchedly, so cruelly. Good night.”

She spoke with difficulty, and he saw that she was deeply moved; and even after the rustle of her skirts had died away in the hall above he stood looking after her, and listening and wondering. Then he opened a bundle of papers containing his computations and bent over them in deep absorption.

“She will sign it; she will sign it,” he repeated, though he did not raise his head.

When twelve o'clock struck he went to the front doorstep and looked up through the boughs of the cedars to the great host of stars. He gazed long, muttering as though at prayer, while the night wind blew upon him until he was chilled.

“The frost, the frost, it will cut it down, the corn, the corn, the beautiful corn! But it is too late, too late!”

He went in and closed the door, muttering, “The corn! the corn!”

CHAPTER XXXII

IN SEMINARY SQUARE

At midnight Leighton sat in the old house in Seminary Square debating the situation with Rodney Merriam.

"What we said to her here this afternoon evidently failed to arouse her. She either doesn't understand, or she doesn't care."

"She understands perfectly," said Merriam; "but it's quite like her to wish to shield him. Her mother did it before her. It's a shame for the money to have gone so; but it was inevitable, and I'm glad it's over now."

"If it *is* over—something might be saved for her."

"We'll let it all go. She'd better be a beggar than have her father published as a felon. Whatever I have shall be hers; and there's my sister, with no one else to care for. The dread of her father's doing something to disgrace her and all of us has hung over me all the year; I'm glad we've reached a crisis. She is like her mother; yes; she is like Margaret. Ah, Morris! it seems to me that I have seen nothing but failure in this world."

Morris was silent. Rodney Merriam was growing old and the thought of it touched him deeply, for Rodney Merriam was his best friend, a comrade, an elder brother, who stood to him for manliness and courage, much as

Carr represented in his eyes scholarship and professional attainment.

"You never saw Zelda's mother?" asked Merriam, presently.

"No."

"You never knew anything of her life?"

"No," said Leighton. The old man's head was bent and he did not look at Leighton; but the young man saw that he was moved by some memory.

"Your father and my sister were once engaged to be married," said Merriam, still not looking up. He was silent for an interval.

"I never knew," said Leighton. "I never had the slightest idea of it."

"I knew you did not know; and Zee does not know, and she mustn't know. It's too bad, Morris, that we can't order our lives as they should be. Mine is a failure. I am sixty years old; and I am not only a failure, but the people I have tried to help I have injured." He spoke bitterly.

"No, no; you must not talk so. If you have done half as much for any one else as for me,—"

"I have done nothing for you,—or for Zee, and I have tried to help her. I have wanted—I have wanted very much for you to care for each other. It's like an echo of an old story. All that I ask now is that you will bear me no ill will when I have gone. I have done the best I could."

"Please don't! There's no reason why you shouldn't stay in the world for many years to come."

"We don't say 'many years' when we have passed sixty. Your father was my intimate friend, Morris. We were

boys together at college,—it's your college and mine, too. I'm glad you went there. Your father would have liked it so. Some of the fellows who taught us, taught you. When you saw them you saw gentlemen and scholars. They gave up the chance of greater things to stay there among the elms and maples of the old campus. God never made finer gentlemen!

"Your father and I were seniors at Tippecanoe when the Civil War came. Your father rose from the ranks to be a colonel. My own affairs didn't prosper; but that's all over now,"—and the old man sighed. "After the war it didn't seem worth while to go back to school, but your father finished, and stayed there in Tippecanoe where he was born, and studied law. I tried the law here, but it wouldn't go; the war had spoiled me—I failed there, as everywhere. My father died and left me enough to live on, and a little more; so I've never done a single thing to my credit from beginning to end."

He was speaking brokenly, in a way that was new to him. He felt helplessly about on the table for the safety match-holder, and Leighton sprang up and handed him a light,—something that he had never before felt that he dare do. No one ever held Rodney Merriam's coat for him, any more than one patted him on the back.

"At the end of our war, the Maximilian affair was on in Mexico and I wanted to have a hand in it. When I came back your father had moved here. He was an ambitious man. There was every likelihood of his taking a high place at the bar; and he had, too, a taste for politics. He could hardly have failed to receive substantial rewards, for everything went to the soldiers in those days. Then he met my sister. She was the youngest

member of our family,—only a girl at the end of the war. She was a very beautiful woman, Morris. She and Zee are much alike; but Zee has marked traits of her own. I don't quite account for them. Her mother was a quick-witted woman, well educated for her day. Zee is more a woman of the world than her mother was and she has more spirit."

Merriam opened a drawer in his table and drew out a miniature painted on porcelain. He put on his spectacles and studied it intently for a moment before handing it to Leighton.

"The old-fashioned way of wearing the hair makes a difference; but to all intents and purposes this is Zee. As Margaret was our youngest, we had a little different feeling about her. I had—I was the oldest—and the rest of them had. She had known no trouble; she was light of heart,—the brightest and cheeriest girl in town; and there seemed no reason why she should not marry happily and never know care or trouble. It was understood in the family that they were to be married, though there was never any formal announcement. Your father meanwhile was establishing himself. Then Margaret went East to visit a friend of hers. That was thirty years ago. I was going to Washington to appear before an army board that was investigating some claims that grew out of the war, and I went with her and left her in New York. We made a fine lark of the trip. When I left her with her friends I said, 'Don't forget Morris; he's back there working for you.'

"My errand in Washington kept me longer than I expected. Margaret went home alone finally, and when I got back, a little later, I found that it was all off between

her and your father. The girl had never been away from home before, and the people she visited put her through lively paces. It was easy to admire her, and the admiration from strangers went to her head. Mariona wasn't very gay in those days, and Margaret had missed a good deal of the social life that she was entitled to."

The old man paused, lost in thought, and Morris was glad of the silence. He was trying to construct for himself the past,—to see his father as Rodney Merriam had painted him, and to see, too, Margaret Merriam as she had been when his father knew and loved her.

Merriam was feeling about for matches,—a sign that he was ready to resume; and Morris again struck a light for him.

"There's no use going into it. She stopped writing to your father without any warning that she had changed. She was completely carried away with the excitement of her New York experiences. Morris came to Washington and asked me what to do, and I sent him to New York to see her and fix it up; but it did no good. She was not ready to settle down yet a while, she told him. I supposed it would all come right, for I had faith in her. She was a true-hearted, gentle woman, but she was proud and headstrong; and your father had his pride, too. I don't blame him for taking it hard. He closed his office here and went back to Tippecanoe. I don't believe they ever saw each other again. When she came home she was her old self; she had been having her fling, and she didn't understand that the same glamour hadn't blinded all of us.

"She really expected your father to meet her on the old footing. She had cared for him a great deal, and it

was the first great shock of her life to find that a man whose heart she had trifled with did not seek her again when she was ready for him. But it had cut into him deep; your father took things hard. It was temperamental, I suppose. I was a loser, too, in all this. I lost the first and best friend I ever had. I rarely saw him after that. He stayed close to the old college town. He made himself its best lawyer. He was sent to the legislature and Congress. He went just so far in politics and then stopped. I always had an idea that he was merely testing his powers. He wanted to see what he could do; and finding that he could make it go, he decided that it wasn't worth the candle."

Merriam rose, threw away his cigar and filled his pipe.

"It doesn't seem quite square to be telling you this. I had never expected to tell you. I shouldn't be telling you now if it hadn't been,—if it hadn't been—"

He crossed to where Morris sat and put his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Yes; I know," said Morris,—“please don't say it;” knowing that it was of Zelda that Merriam was thinking.

"My sister never let us know by any conscious sign that she had any regrets. There was a great spirit in her. She was a thoroughbred. She was a wonderful woman. But as the years passed, I think she tired of the strain of playing a part. Your father was getting on; his name was a good deal in the newspapers in those days. Then suddenly came the news of his marriage. You know all this. Your mother was a Maryland woman whom he met in Washington. Up to that time I think Margaret always thought he would come back to her. She had offers to marry repeatedly, but she stayed at home up there in the

old house until our father and mother died. I always had the curse,—the *Wanderlust*. I sometimes wake up in the morning, even now, with a mad sort of hunger to be moving. I've put all my maps in the garret. The very sight of one makes me want to pack my trunk. But I'm getting old and I don't want to be shipped home in a box.

"I'll finish my story. I went away for a long trip late in the seventies, and when I got back my sister was about to be married,—to Ezra Dameron. He had lived here for a good many years. He was one of those psalm-singing fellows who build their lives on the church, and have a smile for everybody. I had never known him well—he is somewhat my senior—and was much older than my sister. He was a fairly presentable man in those days,—the old clothes and hatchet and nails came later. He had an established business and was an eminently respectable citizen. You know the rest of the story. My mind's wandering to-night. I'm getting old and I don't see anything very cheerful ahead and mighty little that's pleasant behind. I'm a failure,—only, I hope, not a very conspicuous one. I never tried very hard. But at times I've had some fun."

"You are hard on yourself. It's a bad frame of mind to get into."

"But the frame's hung,—and the picture isn't attractive. One of these days the wire will break and the whole thing will go to smash." And the old man laughed at the conceit.

"My father told me once that you were the finest man he had ever known. I remember it very well. I was a kid at the time, playing one afternoon on the hillside

over at Tippecanoe, where we lived. It was Fourth of July, the first one I remember much about. Father got out his sword for me to play with; he told me you had given it to him."

"He hadn't forgotten?" and Merriam smiled in a gentle, sweet way that made something very like tears come into Leighton's eyes. "He hadn't forgotten?" the old man repeated. "God! It was after Shiloh,—and that was yesterday!"

"He talked about you often. The war had meant a great deal to him. But I could never get him to talk to me about himself. I used to ask him for war stories, but he always put me off."

"Most of the old fellows who really saw service felt that way, Morris. War isn't funny. It's what Sherman said it was! Now, I've said things to you, my boy, that I never meant to say to any one. I hope you won't think hard of me for telling you of your father and my sister. But ever since I've known you, I've thought about it constantly,—your mother may know about Margaret Merriam. It was like your father to tell her. I have never seen your mother, but I hope that sometime I may know her. I may get over to commencement with you next year. They've put up a tablet for the Tippecanoe men who went to the war. And our names are in the big monument down here. It's glory enough!"

"Yes, I hope you will go over to Tippecanoe with me sometime. Mother will be glad to see you." He hesitated a moment, and added, the words coming slowly:

"My mother is the dearest woman in the world. She has made every sacrifice for me. I feel guilty these days about not having her here with me; but that will come

later. You know I always go over to spend every other Sunday with her. If I prosper I'll have a house here some day, so we can be together."

"I'm not afraid but that you will do what is right. You are the son of your father. I don't believe you take things as hard as he did. Don't do it. And don't remember what I have told you to-night. It's a queer story. And it hasn't any moral at all. Your father missed something out of his life,—the fine ardor of his younger manhood, maybe. But he had your mother and he had you. It wasn't he that was punished."

He was silent a moment, and then blurted out:

"What does Zelda think of Pollock?"

"I don't know!" Morris rose and walked the length of the room.

"What does she think of you, then?" demanded Merriam, looking directly at Morris.

"I think she hates me," said Morris. He turned and left the house abruptly, leaving the old man alone with his memories.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FIRST OF OCTOBER

The old Dameron house had known much of the pain and joy of life. Merriams had been born and had died there; but the tumult of spirit that shook it on the last night of September was of a new and disquieting order.

Zelda closed the door and sat down at her desk by the window. She went over the interview with her father sentence by sentence, with surprise that she could remember so well; and a kind of terror possessed her, now that she saw the hideousness of it all. One sentence rang in her head over and over again, like a tolling bell; and she could see at every repetition the angry light that had flashed in her father's eyes:

"I wish you would not lie to me, Ezra Dameron!"

She doubted whether she had really said it; but it continued to taunt her. She tested her memory by omitting his name at the end; but back it came again and again; and the name with its deep insult, its ugly disavowal of their kinship, was always the climax of every sentence.

"Ezra Dameron!"

In her memory it rose at the end just as it had risen and clung in the room below as she had spoken it. It seemed to her that it must be ringing across the night;

and it was all wrong, wrong, wrong! She bowed her head in her hands and wept.

She grew calm again as the night wore on. It seemed that she had been there in the dark room for an eternity when she heard a clock strike midnight in one of the lower rooms. She threw up a shade and looked out, finding in the lights of the streets and houses a grateful contact with the outer world. In a house that she identified she saw a light in the room of a girl she knew very well; and she fell to wondering about this friend, whose father was a well-known man of affairs,—whose name none spoke but to praise. She felt the sob coming into her throat, and drew down the blind as though to shut out the mockery the thought awakened of her own father.

"I wish you would not lie to me, Ezra Dameron!"

She threw herself on the bed and lay for long, dreaming, wondering. She thought of every place she had ever been, of every one she knew; and little things long forgotten sped past in the running flood-tide of memory.

At last she found a point of rest for her spirit. She needed help, and it was her right to demand it of her uncle. She had led a false life out of devotion to her mother's memory, that no one might say that she had been weak where her mother had been strong; but it was at an end now. It would be a simple matter to leave the house at an early hour in the morning and go to her uncle's door, or she could summon him to come to her; and while she debated which course she should adopt she fell asleep.

The first gray light of the autumn morning was breaking when she awoke, chilled and numbed. She was very

tired from lying cramped in her clothes on the bed, but she arranged the pillows on a couch, and lay down on it, drawing a comforter about her.

Her thoughts found new channels. She watched the eastern window whiten slowly and listened to the first tentative notes of traffic in the street. She had been trying to avoid thinking of Morris Leighton, but the thought of him was sweet in her heart. He had offered her his love and she had repelled him, not as a woman may, with an honest denial, but in a spirit of hard rejection of all that life and love meant. As the dawn grew her thoughts sought little harbors of security and peace that her love for him made; and she fell asleep as a child will, when it has known a hurt in its little world, but finds oblivion at last under the soothing touch of loving hands.

She woke as the little French clock in her room, chimed seven, and as she lay for a moment taking account of her surroundings, she heard a step in the hall outside her door. It was her father; he stood by her door an instant listening, and then passed on slowly to the stairway.

"I wish you would not lie to me, Ezra Dameron!"

The hateful words came back to her again! She had failed! This was the thought that the morning brought; and as she rose from the couch her mother's book, with its fateful words, fell on the floor.

She caught it up and pressed it against her face.

"Mother! O mother!" she whispered. "Yes; I have failed; I have failed," she said.

And with the sense of failure dominant in her mind she made ready for the day. It was her birthday; she was twenty-one, and that was very old!

By the time she was ready to go down stairs to meet her father she saw the whole matter in what seemed to her a sane, reasonable spirit; she was even tranquil, as she sat for a moment at her dressing-table, her hands clasped before her, pondering her course. She had put on a cloth street-gown; and fastened a black stock at her throat. The little book lay beside her and she carried it to her desk and put it away in the drawer, where she had kept it since the morning a year ago, when it had first fallen under her eyes in the garret. She had been false to its charge; but that was past. She had failed; but she would begin again.

Her heart beat fast as she went down stairs. Her father sat in the sitting-room as he always did, waiting for her to come to breakfast; but as she stood upon the threshold, whence she had often called her good morning, he did not look up from the newspaper with his usual smile. She was touched by the pathos of his figure. He seemed older, more shrunken; his profile, as the early light gave it to her, was less hard. His lean cheeks had the touch of color they always wore in the morning from his careful shaving, and his long hair was brushed back with something more than its usual uncompromising smoothness. A certain primness and rigidity in him which had often vexed her, struck only her pity now.

"Father!"

He rose and turned toward her with a pathetic appeal in his eyes.

"Good morning, Zee," he said. Habit was strong in him and they usually went to breakfast as soon as she came down. He took a step now toward the dining-room.

"Father, I wish to speak to you a moment," she said kindly; and he paused.

"I am sorry for what happened last night. I was not quite myself; I said things that will always trouble me if you—unless you can forgive me. I was wrong,—about everything. You must let me help, if I can help you,—in any way."

He said nothing, but stared at her.

"What angered me was that you weren't quite frank, father. I didn't care about the money. It wasn't that—but if things haven't gone well with you, I wish to share the burden. No,—I mean it,—that I am sorry,—let us be quite good friends again."

She went up to him quickly and took his hand.

"Father," she said.

"Zee, my little girl,—my little girl," he began brokenly, touching her cheeks with trembling hands.

"Yes, father," she said, wishing to help him.

"I have been very wicked; I have led a bad life. I must not harm you; I am not fit—"

"You are my father," she said, and touched his forehead with her lips, wondering at herself.

She led him to the table and talked to him brightly on irrelevant matters. The situation was now in her own hands and she would not fail again. She usually visited the kitchen after breakfast to make her list for the grocer; but this morning she went back to the sitting-room with her father. The autumn morning was cool, and she bent and lighted the fire.

"Now," she said, rising quickly and smiling at him, "there are those bothersome business matters that we

were talking about last night. I wish to sign that paper—”

He shook his head.

“You can’t do it, Zee. You have lighted the fire with it.” The deed had been torn to pieces and thrown upon the kindling in the grate,—half had already been destroyed.

“That is probably just as well. We shall make a new one,” she said, in a matter-of-course tone. “I wish you would tell me, so that I may understand, just what it is that has happened.”

“It’s a long story. I thought I should be able to make a great fortune for you. It was my greed,—my greed.”

“Let us not use ugly words about ourselves, father. A great many people lose their money. It isn’t so terribly tragic. Only,—there mustn’t be any further trouble.”

“What I proposed about the deed was purely selfish—to shield myself. It is a grave matter—I have betrayed you—I have betrayed your mother’s trust. I have robbed you.”

“I haven’t been robbed, father, and I don’t intend that anybody shall use such words to me. We shall make the deed; no one need ever know that anything has happened.”

“You are kind; you are more than generous, Zee; but I was mad when I asked you to re-create the trust last night. I am a bad man; I must face my sins; I have lived a lying, evil life. I am a thief, worse than a thief.”

“My father can’t be a thief,” she said.

“I am a thief,—your uncle will see that I am punished. And it will be better so,—if only I did not drag you down, smirch your name.”

Her strength,—her readiness to meet the situation grew as she saw his weakness.

“How bad is it, father; have we anything left? Don’t be afraid to tell me. It’s concealment you must avoid. If we haven’t a thing—”

Her tone reassured him; he lifted his head with more courage.

“This house—the place in the country—they are free. They are yours to-day. My investments,”—he hesitated and blinked at the word—“they can not come back to injure you.”

“Then this house and the farm are still ours.”

“They are yours, not mine. I have wasted so much! It was a fortune,—nearly half a million dollars when I began throwing it away.”

“I don’t believe that’s very much. When you haven’t a million you’re,—you’re not in it!” and she laughed. “The loss of anything else isn’t worth crying over. And then, you might have made a great deal more out of it.”

He flinched, knowing how culpable he was; but her generosity and kindness were lifting his spirit.

“I have given an option on a piece of ground—you may know it—out by the creek, and have received a thousand dollars on account of it. It may be binding on you. It grew out of my necessity. It is not fair for me to talk to you of these things at all. You should take advice of some one else,—just as though there were no sort of tie between us.”

“We are not going to do it that way,” said Zelda, decisively. “We are going to understand this between ourselves. Now this strip of ground that has been practically sold. What is there about that?”

"The money should be returned, or offered to them. Balcomb was managing it—"

"Mr. Jack Balcomb?—then of course it wasn't regular."

"It was my fault, Zee."

"I don't believe it. He was contriving a pitfall,—that is what might have been expected of him. And he came to our house and pretended to be our friend!"

"Yes; he pretended that; but I pretended much more. Deceit is something that feeds on itself."

He repeated the words, "It feeds on itself," as though he found satisfaction in them. He was quite willing now to yield everything to Zelda's hands. The very way in which she asked questions was a relief to him.

"Mr. Balcomb gave you a thousand dollars to bind a bargain—is that what they call it?—for the sale of the creek strip. I think I understand that. But are there debts,—are there other things that must be paid? And if we still have two houses we can get money for them. We must face the whole matter now,—please keep nothing back."

"I have told you everything. I have squandered your money in speculations,—gambling is the name for it; but I have kept the farm and this house, untouched. Everything else has gone and I have given an option for the sale of that strip of ground on the creek. And I sold a block of lots belonging to you, in an irregular way. I could not sell property without an order of court—that was required by your mother's will; but my necessities were great, and Balcomb arranged an abstract to suit himself—but I let him do it. I am the guilty one; it is my crime."

"Let us not use unpleasant words. It's my birthday. I'm quite grown up and you must let me help—or find help!"

"Yes; but not Rodney; not your uncle," he said hurriedly. "He is violent, very violent. He would have no mercy on me. And I am an old man, and broken, very badly broken."

He settled back in his chair despairingly.

"I shall have to tell Uncle Rodney; but you need have no fear of him, I promise you that."

"He is very violent,—he and I have never been friends."

"You imagine that. I shall take care of him. He and I understand each other perfectly," she added, and smiled to herself.

"Mr. Carr is your lawyer, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes; but he has been away. I took advantage of his absence to do things he would never have countenanced."

"There is Mr. Leighton."

"No, no, not that man!" She had tried to avoid any reference to the interview of the night before, but the mention of Leighton's name brought the whole wretched scene clearly before her again. It was he, more than her uncle, that she relied on.

"I'm sorry you feel toward him as you do, father. I believe that we might trust him. I look upon him as a friend."

Ezra Dameron was weak and the talk was wearying him. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the chair, moving it from side to side restlessly.

He was silent for a moment; then he brought his eyes to bear on her.

"Zee," he began haltingly,—“Zee, I’m sorry I spoke of him as I did. I was quite out of my senses. He is a fine, manly fellow.”

“Don’t trouble about anything, father,” she said, and went to her room for her wraps.

Ezra Dameron was beaten and he was not heroic in defeat. He was stunned by the failure of his gambling operations. He had lived so entirely in dreams for a year that it was difficult for him to realize the broad daylight of a workaday world. Echoes of the harsh things that had passed between him and the child of his own blood but a few hours before still haunted him. She had summoned the apparition of her dead mother and had called him a liar; and he had insulted her in the harshest terms he knew; but he was now leaning upon her helplessly. He did not know, and he could not understand, the motives that were prompting her. He had thrown away her money, and she did not arraign him for it; she was even devising means of covering up his ill-doings; and the fact that one could overlook and pardon the loss of a fortune was utterly beyond his comprehension.

When she came down, her father was still sitting as she had left him, with a look of unutterable dejection on his face.

“You won’t go out to-day,—of course!”

“What? No! no! My business is over. If they come for me they will find me here,—here—at home,” he said wearily.

His smile, the smile that had been hard to bear, was gone.

“Try to cheer up,” she said, resting her hand on his shoulder for a moment. “Don’t talk to anybody about

business of any kind. I'm going down to uncle's; and you needn't be afraid of him, or of anybody."

She went to the telephone and called her uncle's number.

"Tell Mr. Merriam that Miss Dameron is coming to his house at once," she said to the Japanese boy who answered.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A NEW UNDERSTANDING

Rodney Merriam opened the door and greeted Zelda cheerily.

"Am I not the early bird?" she demanded, walking into the library and flinging at its owner her usual comment on its eternal odor of tobacco.

"I've been here early in the morning and late at night, *mon oncle*, and it's always the same. I'm glad to see a cigar this morning. It's the pipe that I protest against. You're sure to have a tobacco heart if you keep it up."

"You're a trifle censorious, as usual," said Merriam, looking at her keenly. "How can I earn your praise? Do you confer a medal for good conduct,—I'd like one with a red ribbon."

"I shan't buy the ribbon till you show signs of improvement. I had hoped that you would congratulate me in genial and cheering words. It's my birthday, I would have you know."

"At my age,—"

"You've said that frequently since we got acquainted."

"As I was saying, at my age, birthdays don't seem so

dreadfully important. But I congratulate you with all my heart," he added sincerely, and with the touch of manner that was always charming in him.

"Thank you. And if you have—any gifts?"

He marveled at her. He had rarely seen her more cheerful, more mockingly herself; and he was proud of her. He had told her a few hours before that her father was a scoundrel, and she had left his house in a rage. She could now come back as though nothing had happened. She was a Merriam, he said to himself, and his heart warmed to her anew.

He drew out the drawer of his desk.

"Of course I haven't any gift for you; but there's some rubbish here—hardly worth considering—that I wish you'd carry away with you."

He took out a little jeweler's box and handed it to her.

"I've rarely been so perturbed," she said. "May I open it now, or must I wait till I get home,—as they used to tell me when I was younger."

"If you're interested in an old man's taste, you may open it. I'm prepared to see you disappointed, so you needn't pretend you like it."

She bent over the gift with the eagerness of a child, and pressed the catch. A string of pearls fell into her lap and she exclaimed over them joyously:

"Rubbish, did you say? Verily, I, that was poor, am rich!"

She threw the chain about her neck and ran it through her fingers hurriedly; then she brushed the white hair from Rodney Merriam's forehead and kissed him.



John Paul Coney

Zelda

"You dear: you delicious old dear! I know you hate to be thanked—"

"But I can stand being kissed. Put those things away now; and don't forget to take care of them. You can give them to your granddaughter on her wedding day."

"I can't imagine doing anything so foolish. I can see myself cutting her off without a pearl."

The suggestion of poverty carried an irony to the mind of both. Her father was a rascal, who had swindled her out of practically all of her fortune. He was a lying hypocrite, Merriam said to himself; and here was his daughter as calm and cheerful as though there were no such thing as unhappiness in the world. His admiration and affection rose to high tide as he played with the pipe that lay by his hand on the table.

"Smoke it if you like," said Zelda. "This curse of habit, how it does take hold of a man! But a man who gives pearls away in bunches,—well, he may make a smoke-house of his castle if he likes."

"The smoke-house suggestion isn't pleasant, my child. Pearls are spoken of usually as being cast before animals whose ultimate destination is the smoke-house. Please be careful of your language."

"I don't care to be roasted or smoked. I have come to talk business and I wish you to deal graciously with me, as becomes the noblest uncle in the world in dealing with his young and wayward niece."

He filled the pipe from a jar, and she grew grave, watching him press the crinkled bits of dusky gold into the bowl, for now she must talk of her father and her own affairs seriously. The light of the match flamed

up and lit the stern lines of Rodney Merriam's fine old face. He threw the stick into a tray.

"Yes, Zee," he said very kindly.

"I'm sorry if I seemed a little—precipitate—yesterday. But it was all new and strange. And I have known that you did not like father. You will overlook whatever I did and said yesterday, won't you?"

There was a note of real distress in her voice.

"It's a good plan to begin the world over every morning. I want to help you in any way I can, Zee. I began at the wrong end yesterday. The fault was all mine!"

"Father and I have had a long talk about his business. He approached it last night on his own account. I have told him that I was coming to you."

"Yes; it is better to have told him that."

She felt quite at her ease, and his kindness encouraged her.

"Father has met with misfortune. He has told me frankly about it: he speculated with the money that belonged to me—and the money is all gone."

"Yes; I am not surprised."

"There is the house we live in and the farm,—they are still free. He says they belong to me."

"If he has not pledged them for debt in any way, they pass to your possession to-day. They are yours now."

"Yes; I understand about that. This is my fateful birthday;" and she smiled.

He smoked in silence, wondering at her.

"But there are some things that are not quite right. Father has told me about them. There is something

about an order of court, which affects a piece of property that he has sold through this Mr. Balcomb. Father takes all the blame for that. I suppose that is what you wished to tell me last night. But I'm glad I heard it from father. I hope you will not be hard on him. He has talked to me in an honorable spirit that, that—I respect very much.”

The sob was again seeking a place in her throat and her eyes filled, but she looked straight at her uncle till the old man grew uncomfortable, and stared at the bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln on the mantel and wished that all men were honest, and all women as fine as this girl.

“Uncle Rodney, I wish to protect father fully in every way from any injury that might come to him for what he has done. I understand perfectly that it was a large sum of money that he lost; but he is an old man and he was doing the best he could.”

The color climbed into Merriam's face and he smoked furiously. The idea that Ezra Dameron had done the best he could, when he had sunk to the level of a common gambler, wakened the wrath against his brother-in-law that was always slumbering in his heart.

“Zee!” he exclaimed, suddenly appearing through his cloud of smoke,—“Zee, he isn't worth it!”

“Please don't!”—and the sob clutched her throat again—“I didn't come to ask what it was worth; but to get you to help me.”

“Yes. Yes; to be sure. It must be done your way,” he replied quickly.

“But it's the right way. Now I want you to tell me what to do. People have bought property of my father,

and he failed to get the approval of the court. I'm not sure that it was his fault,—it must have been Mr. Balcomb's way of doing it. But it makes no difference, and father takes all the blame. Now a title given in this way is not right,—is that what you say?"

"We say usually that titles are good or bad,"—and he smiled at her.

"But there must be a way of making this good."

"Yes; perhaps several ways. That is for a lawyer. You are the only person that could take advantage of an omission of that sort, I suppose."

"That is what I wish to know. And it wouldn't be very much trouble to make it right."

"We must ask a lawyer. Morris understands about it. He is considered a good man in the profession. The advantage of calling on him is that he is a friend and knows Balcomb."

"I told father I might ask Mr. Leighton to help us."

Rodney looked at her quickly. Ezra Dameron, Zelda his daughter, and Morris Leighton! The combination suggested unhappy thoughts.

"Morris is coming up this morning. He said eleven, and he's usually on time. That's one of the good things about Morris. He keeps his appointments!"

"I imagine he would. Uncle Rodney, I'm going to ask you something. It may seem a little queer, but everything in the world is a little queer. Did you ever know—was there anything,"—it was the sob again and she frowned hard in an effort to keep back the tears—"I mean about mother—and Mr. Leighton's father?"

The blood mounted again to the old man's cheek, and he bent toward her angrily.

"Did he throw that at you? Did Ezra Dameron, after all your mother suffered from him, insult you with that?"

"Please don't! Please don't!" and she thrust a hand toward him appealingly. "I used to see the word *past* in books and it meant nothing to me. But now it seems that life isn't to-day at all; it's just a lot of yesterdays!"

The old man walked to the window and back.

"It was your mother's mistake; but it must not follow you. When did your father tell you this?"

"Yesterday,—last night. I had provoked him. It is all so hideous, please never ask me about it—what happened at the house—but he told me about that."

"He's a greater dog than I thought he was; and now he has thrown himself on your mercy! I've a good mind to say that we won't help him. Morris's father was a gentleman and a scholar; and Morris is the finest fellow in the world."

"Yes; but please don't scold! It won't help me any."

"No; I can't ever scold anybody. My hands are always tied. I'm old and foolish. Talk about the past coming back to trouble us! You have no idea what it means at my age; it's the past, the past, the past! until to-day is eternally smothered by it."

He cast himself into his chair; and she laughed at him—a laugh of relief. His anger had usually amused her by its lack of reason; it gave her now a momentary respite from her own troubles.

"I've never got anything in the world that I wanted. Here I hoped that you and Morris might hit it off—"

"Please don't,—"

"But **you** wouldn't have it; you've treated him most shabbily."

"I shouldn't think he would have told you anything about it," she said with dignity.

"Of course he didn't tell me anything about it! Don't you think I know things without being told?"

"I don't envy you the faculty," she said, with a sigh. "I'm not going to look for trouble. It all comes my way anyhow."

Her tone of despair touched his humor and he laughed and filled his pipe again; then the bell rang and he went to open the door for Morris.

"Morris," he began at once, "we can omit the preliminaries this morning. Mr. Dameron's trusteeship has expired. His daughter is entitled to the property left her by her mother, or its equivalent. There has been a sale of property that is not quite regular, and—"

"We wish to make it quite legal,—quite perfect," said Zelda.

"And we wish to avoid publicity. We must keep out of the newspapers."

"I understand," said Morris.

Zelda had purposely refrained from mentioning her father's own plan of continuing himself as trustee to hide the fact of his malfeasance; but with Morris present, she felt that her uncle was easier to manage.

"We have agreed to continue the trusteeship, just as it has been. Father and I have had a perfect understanding about it."

"No! no! we won't do it that way," shouted Merriam.

But Zelda did not look at him. Her eyes appealed

to Morris and he understood that in anything that was done, Ezra Dameron must be shielded; and the idea of hiding Dameron's irregularities struck him as reasonable and necessary.

"You can give your father a power of attorney to cover everything he has left of yours if you wish it," said Morris.

"I won't hear to it; it's a farce; it's playing with the law," declared Rodney.

"Uncle Rodney, I'm glad the law can be played with. There's more sense in it than I thought there was. You will do it for me that way, won't you—please? And there are some people who have paid father for an option on what he calls the creek property. I wish to protect them, too."

"You needn't do that," said Morris. "We can repudiate the option probably. It's not your affair, as the law views it."

"But I wish to make it my affair. I wish to do it, right away. I've heard that important things can't be done right away, but these things must be,"—and she smiled at Morris and then at her uncle.

"You understand, Zee, that if you give this power of attorney you are brushing away any chance to get back this money."

"Yes; perfectly. And now, Mr. Leighton, how long will it take?"

Morris looked at Merriam as though for his approval.

"Uncle agrees, of course, Mr. Leighton. You needn't ask him,"—and the two men laughed. There was no making the situation tragic when the person chiefly concerned refused to have it so. She had accepted the

loss of the bulk of her fortune and the fact of her father's perfidy without a quaver. She seemed, indeed, to be in excellent spirits, and communicated her cheer to the others.

"If this is final—" began Morris.

"Of course it's final," said Zee.

"I'll come back here at four o'clock and you can sign the power of attorney if you wish. But there's one thing I'm going to do—on my own responsibility, if necessary. I'm going to get back that option on the creek strip that Mr. Dameron gave my friend Balcomb. Balcomb's a bad lot, and I'm not disposed to show him any mercy."

"I'd rather you didn't—if my father pledged himself to sell—"

"Let Morris do it his way," begged Merriam. "You may be sure Balcomb won't lose anything."

"I'm afraid he won't," said Leighton, and left them.

"Sit down, Zee," said Merriam, as Zelda rose.

"I must go back to father,—you can imagine that these things haven't added to his happiness."

"Humph!" and Rodney folded his arms and regarded Zelda thoughtfully.

"I wish you wouldn't say 'humph!' to me, *mon oncle!* It isn't polite."

"Zee," said the old gentleman, kindly; "what do you intend doing? I suppose you have no plans,—but you must let me make some for you."

"Of course I have plans; they are all perfected, and they are charming. There's no use in talking to you about them. I've given you enough trouble."

"I hope you'll give me more! As long as my troubles are confined to you I'll try to bear them."

"Oh sir, thank you,—as the young thing always says to the good fairy uncle in the story-books. Well, as you seem sympathetic I'll tell you. You remember that little Harrison Street house where Olive lived? Well, they owed father some money and the house was mortgaged. Olive wouldn't let me release the mortgage,—or whatever they call it; but it's the dearest house in town. Olive and her mother are going to move into a flat. I loved that house the first time I stepped inside of it. Well, I'm going to sell the farm and the old house where we live, and anything else we happen to have, and move to Harrison Street; and I'm going to give music lessons; and I can get a place to sing in a church whenever I please. I've had offers, in fact. It's all perfectly rosy and beautiful,—” and she stretched out her arms and played an ascending scale of felicity in the air with her fingers. “Perhaps, sometimes, you will come over to see us in the new place!”

“Zee, I have sometimes hoped that you had a slight feeling of affection for me;” and Rodney Merriam's face grew severe.

“How you do flatter yourself! Go on!”

“And I want you to do something for me.”

“If it's sensible I'll consider it.”

“I want you to go home and pack up and come down here to live with me. And I beg of you don't talk about giving music lessons and moving to that Harrison Street hovel,—even as fun it doesn't amuse me. Come now, be a sensible girl. How soon can you move?”

“You seem to be addressing me in the singular number. There are two of us to plan for.”

Her lips quivered and the tears came to her eyes.

Here was the old question of her father, that had been a vexation all the long year through. If only she might be suffered to manage her affairs alone!

"Please let me go! You have been so kind to me—I should hate awfully—"

"But Zee,—we must be reasonable. You are young, and your way must be made as easy as possible—for the road's a tough one at best. It seems a hard thing to say, but your father is no proper companion for you. I can arrange for him in some way; but I owe it to you, to your mother's memory, to keep you apart. I haven't anything else to do but care for your happiness; and your father doesn't fit into any imaginable scheme of life for you."

Zee laughed.

"Please don't imagine schemes of life for me. I have one of my own, and it's quite enough. And my mother,—"

"Yes, your mother, Zee."

"My mother—was a good woman, wasn't she, Uncle Rodney?"

"She was a wonderful woman, Zee."

"And she did what she thought was right, didn't she?"

"She certainly did."

"And do you think—is it reasonable to believe—that she would be pleased to know that I had abandoned father because he had been unfortunate, even criminal, if you will have it so? Do you think, Uncle Rodney, that to leave him in his old age would be quite in keeping with your own idea of chivalry? I'm sorry to know that you would propose such a thing. I should

like to have your help, but I don't want it on any such terms,—on any terms."

She spoke very quietly and waited patiently for anything further that he might have to say. The clock on the mantel struck twelve and across the town the whistles were blowing lustily the noon hour. Merriam lifted his clenched right hand slowly and opened and shut it several times, then dropped it to his knee.

"Zee," he said, "you shall do it your own way,"—he smiled—"with a few exceptions. You are right about it. Your mother would like you to stand by your father. I can't even say what is in my heart about him; but I had counted on—having you—now—for myself."

And the old man's face twitched from the stress of inner conflict. Zelda crossed to his chair and threw her arms about him.

"Dear Uncle Rodney!" she cried, and then sprang away, drawing him up by his hands.

"I'm going to be a lot nicer to you than I ever was before," she declared. "And you will help me to be good!"

"There are two or three things that I want you to do for me, Zee. I ask you as a favor,—as a very great favor."

"It's going to be something hard,—but go on!"

"Let me be your banker. And don't begin teaching or making yourself ridiculous in other ways. I have enough, and I want you to begin having the benefit of it now. And I should like you to keep the old house up there, for a while, at least. My father built it, and I was born there—and your mother—and you! I

should hate to have it pass to a stranger, in my day. And another thing. You've done a beautiful but not a very sensible thing in continuing your father in charge of your business—what's left of it; but you'd better let me—consult with him about matters."

"But you won't—scold, or be disagreeable?"

He smiled at her words, which seemed ridiculous when applied to the squandering of a comfortable fortune, under circumstances that did not appeal to his pity.

"I'm not going to be hard on your father. My enemies have always escaped me. I suppose it's because I'm so amiable."

There was a pathos in his figure as he stood, quite free from his chair, his hands thrust into the side pockets of his coat, his shoulders a trifle drooped, and the half-smile upon his face marking still his inner reluctance.

"Zee," he said, and he swayed a little, and put out his hand and rested his finger-tips on the table,—“Zee, you are the finest girl in the world. I wish you would tell your father that I shall be up to see him soon. And don't worry about what I shall say to him. You can be there if you like.”

He followed her to the step, looking after her as she walked swiftly away, kissing her fingers to him from the corner.

Across the street, in Seminary Square, the wind was driving the leaves hither and thither aimlessly in the warm October sunshine, and it stole across to Rodney Merriam and played with his fine white hair. The branches of the park trees were so thinned now that he

could see clearly the bulky foundation of the new post-office. He sighed at the thought of the changes that must come, watched the procession of automobiles and wagons in High Street, and glanced at the uncompromising lines of the overshadowing flat whose presence never ceased to annoy him.

Then he anathematized it under his breath and went in and abused the Japanese boy because luncheon was not ready.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SETTLING OF ACCOUNTS

"Good-by, and hail my fancy!" shouted Balcomb as Leighton entered the promoter's office. "Excuse my quotation from Whitman, the good gray poet; but you always suggest bright college years, the dearest, best of life to me, Demetrius."

"I don't want to suggest anything to you, Balcomb. I've come to talk seriously about an unpleasant matter."

"The devil you have! You've certainly brought a death's-head with you."

"You always had the seeds of scoundrelism in you. I had hoped they wouldn't sprout; but the sprouts are in full bloom."

"Sprouts don't bloom; but we'll pass that with the gloomy silence it deserves," said Balcomb, imperturbably lighting a cigarette.

"You've been taking advantage of Mr. Dameron. You've played upon his necessities and got a block of lots away from him for nothing. You've also got an option from him on the strip of land out there on the creek where you propose putting up that flat you've been talking about. While you were planning this you were going to his house, where his daughter received you with courtesy. And I suppose that, in a way, I was responsible

for you. I rather let it be inferred that you were a good fellow, and I allowed you to mention that we had been friends in college, though I knew all the time that you were a blackguard. I really think Miss Dameron might forgive you for involving her father in disgrace, but I don't think she would ever overlook your attentions to her cousin at a time when you were plotting to swindle a member of the family."

"You are a fool," said Balcomb. "I'm not responsible for old man Dameron's morals, am I? He was crazy to get money and came to me because he knew I had some snap and could get cash for his lots. He lied to me about it all along. You can't charge me with notice of all the private history of the Dameron family. I didn't know about the trusteeship until I took the deed. I was just as surprised as anybody when I found it out."

Leighton smiled at Balcomb's tone of outraged innocence.

"You're such a cheerful rogue I don't believe you really appreciate the fact that there are limits to human enterprise. Now your interurban friends are jays, aren't they?"

"They are, my brother. They are the genus *cyanocitta cristata*, or common blue jay, and mighty fine types, I can tell you that." He slapped his thigh in joy at the thought.

"You are a depraved beast," declared Leighton. "It seems a shame to disturb your peace of mind; but I came here to talk business. Now, your agricultural friends, when you sprang this lot purchase, asked about the title to the real estate, didn't they? If they didn't they are not the farmers I take them for."

"Your confidence is not misplaced. They did, and they quite satisfied themselves about it."

"They wanted to see an abstract of title."

"They certainly did, old man. You're a regular mind reader."

"They asked for an abstract of title," continued Leighton, "and you gave them one, didn't you?"

"Please don't mention it, an thou lovest me. They nearly wore out the damned thing studying it."

"I have seen a copy of the original at the abstractor's office."

"Awfully keen of you, I'm sure," said Balcomb, amiably. "I tell you, you're a credit to the bar, Morris. You do honor to your preceptor."

He bowed mockingly, but he was growing a trifle anxious and fingered the papers on his table nervously.

"The abstract, as I was saying, consisted of a good many pages. And there was a certain page forty-two, where a will was set forth, in due form, when you got the document from the abstract office; but when your friend Van Cleve made his report on it for your rural syndicate that particular page was missing, and another, bearing the same page number, but with certain points of the Margaret Merriam will omitted, was substituted. That is quite correct, isn't it?"

"You may search me! If there's anything crooked about that abstract it's not on me, you can bet your life. But say, you're getting insulting. Now, I'll tell you something, Leighton, as long as you've come to me in this friendly spirit,—this old-college-friendly spirit. I've been all over this thing in my mind. I'm not the twittering little birdling you think I am, to fix up a fake abstract

and work it off on a lot of reubs. I didn't order that abstract made; I didn't have a damned thing to do with it. You seem to think that because there's a beneficiary of the fifteenth amendment in the cordwood, I must be there somewhere, dressed up like a minstrel first part; but you're a dead loser. I'm prepared to prove that that abstract of title was ordered by your Uncle Ezra Dameron, and that he gave it to me with his own hands. I guess you'll have to admit that my reputation in this community is about as good as your Uncle Ezra's. Now, it wounds my pride to have you talking to me as though I were the traditional villain of our modern melodrama, that you have cornered with a merry 'Ha, ha! base churl, at last I have tracked thee to thy lair!' No, darling, you can't catch me on fly paper—not while my wits are in good working order. If you can see how to save Miss Dameron's money without getting her dear old papa into the mulligatawney all well and good; but if you're trying to bring me within the long, lean arm of the penal code you'll have to get better. It's your Uncle Ezra that you're looking for."

"We're going to protect the stock-holders of your company whose money has gone into the Roger Merriam lots," continued Leighton. "I honestly think I could set aside the sale; but we'll be generous and straighten the title for you."

"I rather guess you will, or Uncle Ezra wears the stripes."

"I don't think I'd say much about the stripes, with that abstract in Harry Copeland's possession. You know Copeland is rather a persistent fellow, and one of his rural friends is in your company."

"The devil he is!" But Balcomb batted his eyes uneasily.

"Now give me that option; it isn't any good, anyhow; but I'll feel more comfortable to have it out of your hands."

"You're welcome to it," replied Balcomb, fiercely. "The old man's crooked, and the idea of his being swindled by me or anybody else is funny, as you'd see if you weren't trying to be his son-in-law. The old fool is playing the bucket shops—"

"I'm in a hurry. Give me the option and get busy about it."

One of the typewriters came in with a card.

"Excuse me, Mr. Balcomb, but the gentleman said he couldn't wait,"—and Balcomb rose from the iron safe before which he was bending and snatched the card.

"Tell him I'm engaged. Tell him I don't want to see him anyhow," yelled Balcomb, in a voice that was perfectly audible to the waiting caller in the anteroom.

"Here," he said to Leighton, in the same tone of fury, "here's your damned option. Give me back the thousand I paid Dameron and go to hell!"

"Now I want you to give me a check for that money you wrung from Mr. Dameron—"

"I didn't wring any money from him, you yelping ape. I *paid* him money. You don't seem to understand this transaction."

"I understand it perfectly. You reported to your company that twenty thousand would buy that group of lots; you took that amount of money from them, gave Mr. Dameron eighteen thousand and put the rest in your pocket as commission. It sounds well, doesn't it?"

"*He* isn't making any kick, is he? I bet he isn't. He was perfectly satisfied. He needed money and was glad to sell at any price. I did him a great service." And Balcomb thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat with the air of a man who is ready and anxious to face the world on any charge.

"Jack, you will write me a check for that money—your commission, as you call it, deducting the one thousand that was paid for this option, or I'll make Mariona too hot to hold you."

"This is blackmail, and, by God! I won't submit to it," shouted Balcomb.

"Maybe so, and you can get redress later if it is. I want your check—whether it's any good or not."

"I'll give you half of it if the old man's beefing," said Balcomb, after a minute's reflection.

"All—right away—quick!"

Leighton rose and stood with his hands thrust into his pockets while Balcomb turned to his desk and wrote the check.

The girl outside was heard debating with the caller, who refused to be denied.

The door opened suddenly and Leighton, with the check and option in his hand, looked up to see Captain Pollock standing within the partition, his little stick, as usual, under his arm.

"Leighton," he said quite imperturbably, "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you, but I'm really glad you're here. In fact, I thought for a moment of going to your office to ask you to come with me—to call on our gifted friend."

"You get out of here, you damned little—"

"My dear Mr. Balcomb, you've called me little before,

and other people have called me little, and I can't help it any more than you can help being a contemptible, lying scoundrel—"

Balcomb made a rush for him, but the captain thrust his stick forward and Balcomb seemed, rather ridiculously, to have impaled himself upon it.

"Stand back, Balcomb," commanded Leighton, and as Balcomb tried again to reach Pollock, Leighton stepped between them.

"I quite agree with you, Pollock, that Balcomb is a bad lot, but this isn't the right place for a scrap."

"I don't care whether it is or not," snapped Pollock. "I'm going to muss him up. He's lied about me; he's tried to blacken my reputation—"

"You're a fool," shouted Balcomb. "I've never mentioned you—I *wouldn't* mention you."

"You wouldn't, wouldn't you? I should like to know what you meant by writing a letter to the War Department charging me with being drunk here in one of the clubs,—a club, you lying blackguard, that you never were in in your life,—that you couldn't get inside of to save your neck. You charged me with being drunk and raising a row in that club; and you hinted that I was in collusion with contractors at work on the army post. You don't deny it, do you?"

"I do, indeed! I never wrote any letter to the War Department on any subject!"

Pollock laughed and took a step toward him.

"Don't you deny what I tell you before Mr. Leighton! I have the letter here in my pocket. It was sent to me direct by my chief, the very hour it reached him. I suppose you thought they would telegraph my discharge

immediately when they got an anonymous letter like that. I've a good notion to break your neck right here."

He was a little fellow, but he seemed suddenly to take on heroic proportions. He whipped open his tightly buttoned coat and drew out an envelope.

"Here's a letter—do you dare tell me you didn't write it—an unsigned typewritten letter to the quartermaster-general. I knew instantly where it had come from."

"I never saw it before; it's a put-up job," declared Balcomb, though not in a tone that carried conviction.

"My chief sent it to me," continued Pollock, "with his indorsement, 'Better find this fellow and punch his head.' And now, by the great Lord Harry, I'm going to obey orders!"

Balcomb ducked under Leighton's arm and bolted for the door, but as his hand found the knob Pollock seized him by the collar and flung him back against the ground-glass partition with a force that shook it.

"Leighton," said Pollock in his blandest tones, as he held Balcomb against the partition at the end of his stick, "I've told you, and probably some of the adjoining tenants have heard me, that Mr. Balcomb is a liar. I wish to add now that he is a coward. Stand up!" he commanded, letting his stick fall, and Balcomb, thus released, made another rush for the door, only to be seized again by the little captain.

Leighton had tried up to this time to keep a straight face, but Balcomb was so clearly frightened to the point of panic that Morris sat down and laughed. Pollock, however, was as grave as an adjutant on parade, and he continued to address Leighton:

"He is a contemptible coward, and I want to warn

him before a witness that if he ever appears at any place where I am—I don't care where or when—I'll rise and proclaim him. Now get out before I break my stick on you!"

He turned away from Balcomb, who seized the moment to dart into the anteroom, where the two young women stood huddled together, and began giving them orders with a great deal of unnecessary vehemence. Leighton and Pollock followed at once, passing through the anteroom at a leisurely pace set by Pollock. At the outer door the captain paused, lifted his hat with a mockery of courtesy to Balcomb's back, and remarked in a pleasant tone:

"Good day, Mr. Balcomb. If you should ever need anything in my line please give me the pleasure of a call."

"Sutler's clerk!" screamed Balcomb. Pollock made a feint of turning back suddenly and Balcomb darted into his private office and slammed the door.

Leighton leaned against the elevator shaft outside and laughed until the corridors rang and sedate tenants came out to see who was disturbing the peace. He laughed at Balcomb's anxiety to keep out of Pollock's way, and he laughed now at Pollock, who joined him, wearing a look of outraged dignity that was altogether out of proportion to his size.

"He called me a sutler's clerk," said the captain, twisting his mustache.

"Then he ducked. His insults don't cut very deep."

"I owe you an apology," said Pollock, when they had reached the street, "for running in on you that way; but I had to tell the chap I knew about his lying letter the hour I got it."

"It's his busy day. I was there on a similar errand," said Leighton. "He's a dangerous person—not in the way of personal violence,"—and they both laughed—"but as an intriguing scoundrel."

"Say, old man,"—they paused on the corner and Pollock cleared his throat once or twice and struck a trolley pole with his stick as he hesitated. "You don't think she's interested in him, do you?"

"Which she are you talking about?"

"I mean Miss Merriam. He's been about with her a good deal. I just wondered." And the captain seemed both perplexed and embarrassed as he continued to tap the pole.

"Miss Merriam is a very bright young woman, and bright young women are not easily deceived," replied Morris.

"You really think they're not? Well, I devoutly *hope* they're not; but I believe I'll ask her."

"I think I'd ask her," said Morris, significantly.

And Captain Frank Pollock walked up-town with a look of determination on his face.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

"I think I have begun to live," said Zelda the next afternoon.

She sat in the parlor at home, talking to her Uncle Rodney.

Her father was out walking about the neighborhood. He had not been down-town since the crisis in his affairs, which had left him much broken. He had been disposed to accept his brother-in-law's kind offices warily at first, but Zelda had reassured him as to her uncle's friendly intentions, and it was a relief to him to be able to shift the responsibility of adjusting his affairs to other shoulders.

To all intents and purposes nothing had changed, and beyond the short-lived gossip of business men who knew him personally, Ezra Dameron's losses passed unnoticed. Olive, who was Zelda's closest friend, never knew just what had happened. Zelda merely told her cousin that her father had gone through some business trouble, but that it had all been straightened out again. Mrs. Forrest knew even less than this; there was, Rodney Merriam said, no manner of use in discussing the loss of Zelda's fortune with his sister, and talking about family matters was a bore anyhow. Rodney was surprised at his

own amiable acceptance of the situation; but it had resulted in linking him closer to Zelda's life; she was dependent on him now as she might never have been otherwise; and as for Ezra Dameron, he was a pitiful object, whose punishment was doubtless adequate. It was possible for Rodney Merriam to sit in the parlor of the old house in which he had been born, and talk to Zelda with an ease and pleasure that he had not known since she came home and went to her father instead of going to live with her aunt or with himself, which would have been the sensible thing for her to do.

"I think I have begun to live," repeated Zelda.

"I hope you are happy, Zee. To be happy's the main thing. There is nothing else in the wide world that counts; and I say it, whose life has been a failure."

"You shouldn't talk so! You must remember that I'm letting you be good to me, kinder and more helpful than any one ever was before to anybody, just because you said you couldn't be happy any other way."

"Yes; I'm going to lead a different life," he said ironically. "It doesn't pay to cherish the viper of enmity in one's bosom. But I suppose there's a certain fun in hating people, even though you never get a chance to even up with them."

"You still have a little lingering paganism in you, *mon oncle*. But it's disappearing. Olive tells me that you and Captain Pollock have quite hit it off. You certainly were nasty to him. He ought to have called you out and made you fight for the snubbings you gave him."

"Bah! I'm a little absent-minded, that's all." But Merriam smiled when he remembered Pollock. "By the way, I've accepted his invitation for to-morrow after-

noon to drive out to the post site with him. I believe you are asked? And Olive and Morris? Which wing of our family is Pollock trying to break into, will you kindly tell me? He has shown you rather marked attention, it seems to me."

"You are quite likely to have a niece in the army. I fancy that it's all arranged; of course, it's been Olive all the time. She hasn't told me yet,—but she doesn't have to tell me!"

"You don't say! I had no idea of it. I was troubled last winter for fear—"

"It was foolish of you. I flattered myself for an absurd little while," she added mockingly, "that he might see something pleasing in me; but, alas and alack! Olive stole him away from me, and she didn't have very hard work doing it, either. But you will help me to start Olive off happily, won't you? You know there's nobody to do anything for her except us. I think she ought to have a church wedding, and you could give the bride away and Aunt Julia could have a wedding breakfast or a large reception for her—all to show the community that we Merriams are really a united family. Maybe Olive will have a military wedding! The prospect is positively thrilling. In any event, you will do your very nicest for her, won't you?"

"I don't see any way out of it," he said, in a tone that was wholly kind. "Olive is a pretty girl and a sensible one. If she's going to be married, I'll let you buy my wedding present for her. Good-by."

It rained the next day and Pollock telephoned to the members of his party that the excursion would be postponed. Zelda hoped that Olive would come up to the

house, and when the bell rang she thought it was her cousin and called to the black Angeline, who still acted as Polly's assistant, to bring Miss Merriam directly up stairs. But it was Morris Leighton whom the girl announced.

"I'll be down in a moment," she said, but she waited, sitting at the table, where she had so often pondered great and little matters during the year, a troubled look upon her face, considering many things. The fact that her mother and Morris's father had once been lovers, as blurted out by her father in his rage and confirmed by her uncle, had impressed her profoundly; she was not a morbid girl, but there seemed something uncanny in the story, and she had determined that Morris should never again speak words of love to her. It was all too pitiful; she had no right to any happiness that Morris might bring her; and here again her mother's memory seemed to follow and lay a burden upon her. She was sorry that she had not asked the maid to excuse her, but it was too late and she went down to the parlor with foreboding in her heart.

Morris was standing at the window watching the rain beat upon the asphalt in the narrow street outside. He turned quickly as he heard her step.

"You are a brave man to venture out in a storm like this! Of course, you knew that our excursion is off? Captain Pollock telephoned that we'd wait until a better day."

"I understood so. But I was keyed to vacation pitch and I thought you wouldn't mind if I came,—if I didn't stay very long."

"Oh, of course,—if you don't stay very long; but you needn't stand—all the time!"

"You wouldn't have had me keep my office a dreary afternoon like this. It's rather cheerless in our office on rainy days, I should like you to know."

"But I've heard that the office is picturesque. You ought to give a tea or do something of that sort, so that the rest of us, who daren't go down otherwise, may see it."

"You should make the suggestion to Mr. Carr when he gets home. It would have weight coming from you."

"I can't imagine it! The firm would probably lose all its clients if a social function were held there."

"I see that you're not really interested in us; you're afraid of the microbes. I suppose our old office must have a lot of them."

They both laughed at the inanity of their talk. The room was chilly, and she rose and found the matches on the mantel.

"No! I can't allow you," she said. "I superintend the laying of these pyres—I know exactly where the paper is—behold!"

The flame leaped suddenly through the light kindling, and as she watched it he felt that her interest in it was the simple unaffected interest of a child. Her dark-red gown enhanced her faint color; he accused the slight black velvet line that crept here and there over the cloth of trying to match her hair and eyes; then he turned his attention to her hands,—that were, he told himself, like swift little birds in their quickness and certainty.

Her father came to the door and hesitated.

"Won't you come and share our fire, father?" Zelda asked.

"No, oh, no! I'm quite busy. It's a very bad day, Mr. Leighton." He turned and they presently heard him climbing the stairs to his room.

It was very still in the parlor, and the wind outside sobbed through the old cedars in accompaniment to the splash of the rain. It was very sweet to her to know that Morris was so near; there was in his presence in the house at this unwonted hour of the day a suggestion of something intimate and new. She was looking away from him into the fire when he rose and drew close to her.

"I have come to ask you to do something for me," he said. "I want you to sing me the song—my song—the one that means—so much—that means everything."

"I can't, I can't! Please don't ask me,"—and she clenched her hands upon her knees.

"You hurt me once,—when you knew you did, when you wished me to be hurt, when I spoke to you of the song,—of my song,—of our song! But I want you to sing it to me now, Zee, and if you can sing it and then tell me that you don't care,—that you don't know what love is,—then I shall never again speak to you—of love—or anything."

"No; I don't know—the song. I can't sing it,—ever again!"

"Is it because you are afraid,—is that it? You can't wound me now by anything that you may say; but if you will sing me the song and then tell me that your word will always be no, then I shall go away, Zee, and I shall never trouble you again."

She remembered, as she listened with her head bowed over her hands, the first time she had heard his voice,

that was deep and strong. It was only a year ago, in Mrs. Carr's drawing-room.

She rose and walked away and looked out through the window upon the rain-swept street; she saw the wet leaves clinging in the walk; it was a desolate picture; and something of the outer dolor, the change of the year, touched her.

"I can't sing your song—any song!" and she turned to him suddenly with laughter in her eyes. "My throat is very painful," she added and laughed.

He did not smile, but took a step nearer.

"Is the reason because you are afraid? I must know,—I have waited a long time to know."

"Some other time,—when the sun is shining, then I may sing it," she said, her eyes upon the window.

"Then if you won't sing it,—if you are afraid of it,—then you mean for me to believe—"

"Nothing!"

"But I won't be thrown off so easily, Zee," he said, as though he had always addressed her so. "You may as well take me seriously,—"

"I'm not—" and mirth lighted her eyes—"I'm not taking you at all!"

"Zee,"—and he drew still nearer, so that he could have put out his hand and touched her.

"Please," she begged, grave again, "please forget all about the song,—and me! I wish you to,—very much. There are reasons,—a great many reasons,—why you must forget all about the song you liked, and everything that I may—suggest to you. Won't you believe me,—please?"

"There can't be any reasons that make any difference."

"You can be kind if you will," she said, "and merciful."

"There is a reason; there is myself! I'm not fit to call your name or to stand near you. I have little to offer; but I love you, Zee,"—and the sincerity of his plea touched her, so that she did not speak for a moment, but stood staring at the rain-beaten pane with eyes that saw nothing.

"You could spare me—if you would," she said.

"I would give my life for you," he answered steadily, unyieldingly. "But I can't let you put me aside,—for any idle fears or doubts. You must tell me what troubles you; you have not told me that you did not care. I shall not go until you tell me what it is that weighs against me. I have a right to one or the other."

She looked at him suddenly; it would be easy to say that she did not care; but her eyes filled at the thought, and she turned to the window again. The beat of hoofs upon the hard street struck upon her with a sense of the world's vastness and the wind in the cedars sang like a mournful prophet of the coming winter. She could not tell him that he meant nothing to her, when he meant so nearly all; but if she should set up a barrier, it might be enough and he would go.

"You know we have had trouble,—that my father has met with losses,—and he needs me. My duty is here; that must be a sufficient reason."

"No," he said instantly, "that is not a reason at all, Zee. You are doing for your father all that you could be asked to do,—and I should not ask you to do less."

"I must do all I can," she said. "There must be no question of loyalty. And now,"—she turned to him smile-

ing,—“it’s very disagreeable outside; let us be cheerful indoors.”

“Zee,” he began gravely, “I’m not so easily dismissed as that. There’s something that I want to say, that I shouldn’t dare say to you, if I did not love you. I knew months ago that you were showing a cheerful face to the world while you suffered.”

“Please, oh, please!” and she lifted her hands to her face. “It is not kind! You must not!”

“You made light of things that you knew were good; you said things often that you did not mean; but you were brave and strong and fine. I understood it, Zee. But now that is all out of the way. There is no use in thinking about it any more.”

“No; but you must know that I talked to you as I did because,—oh, because I hated goodness! I tried to hate it! It was because—father—but I mustn’t—speak of it.”

“I understand all about that, Zee.”

“But I am very old,”—she went on pitifully; “I am very old, and my girlhood—it all went away from me last year—and every day I had to act a part, and I did so many foolish things,—you must have thought—”

“That I loved you, Zee,” he declared, refusing to meet her on the ground she sought.

“The sweetest thing in the world,” she said, “must be—not to know—of evil; not to know!” and there was the pent-up heartache of a year in the sigh that broke from her.

“Yes; it was all too bad, Zee; but we’ll find better things ahead—I’m sure of it.”

She was not ready to look into the future. Her mind was still busy with the year that had just ended.

"I said so many things that I did not mean, sometimes, and I was hard—on you, when you meant to be kind; but I'm sorry now."

"You *were* a little hard on me now and then, but I think I liked it. Some day I shall laugh about it."

"I don't see how you ever could," she declared severely.

"I was thinking of the moose," he answered, smiling down on her. "It was your idea that I lacked enterprise; I wasn't the venturesome knight you had hoped to see. You liked to make me humble by setting goals for me in new fields that you knew well enough I could never reach. That was the way of it, wasn't it, Zee?"

"It was very foolish of me. I really never meant anything at all about the moose—and things like that."

"Don't take it back! I'm still going to get the moose or his equivalent. I'm going to do something quite large and fine before I give up the fight, only I want you to make it worth while."

He rested one hand on the back of a chair; the other was dropped lightly into the pocket of his coat. His gray eyes, when she looked up at him, were steady and kind. He had not the appearance of a defeated man. She had once heard Mr. Carr say that Morris Leighton was a fellow who "got things done," and the remembrance of this did not reassure her.

"I hope—I know—you will be a successful man," she said slowly, "and now let us be good friends."

She turned as though to sit down and be quit of a disagreeable topic forever, but he drew a step nearer and took her hands.

"Zee,"—and the smile was all gone from his eyes—"there isn't any such easy escape for you. Your reasons

are no reasons. You have said all that there is to say, haven't you? But you haven't said that you do not love me. If you will say that I shall go away, and if that is so I must know it now."

She struggled to free her hands, but he held them tight. She drew away from him, her face very white.

Suddenly she raised her eyes and looked at him.

"You must let me go. I can't tell you why; but there can be nothing between you and me."

"I love you, Zee," he said steadily. "You must let me help you,—if there is any new trouble,—if your father has met some new difficulty—"

"Oh, you don't understand! It isn't father—alone—I mean. I can't tell you—I can't speak of it—it was my mother—and your father—their unhappy story; but there is a fate in these things! It's not that I don't believe in you; it's because I have grown afraid of happiness! And it is all so strange, that you and I should meet here and that I should have hurt you last summer—maybe—as my mother hurt your father. And that was before I knew their story."

"We must not think of them and what they did; we must think of ourselves. I know the story of your mother and my father. Your uncle told me, quite recently."

"Yes; Uncle Rodney knew."

"And now that is all there is of that and you haven't alarmed me a particle, Zee."

"I knew you wouldn't understand," she faltered.

"I love you, Zee," he said, simply and sincerely, as a man speaks who does not use words lightly. He put his arms about her and drew her close to him. The tears sprang into his eyes as he saw how wholly she yielded her

girl's heart to him and how little there remained to win. He felt her breath, broken with happy little sobs, against his face.

"We have our own life to live, Zee; there is no fate that is stronger than love," he said.

* * * * *

Midnight had struck. The rain had ceased and the autumn stars looked down benignly upon the world. It was very still in the Dameron house. Zelda sat dreaming before her table, her mother's little book lying closed before her. A new heaven and a new earth had dawned for her on the day just ended and in her heart there was peace. She rose and lighted a candle and went down through the silent old house, carrying the book in her hand. In the parlor a few coals still burned fitfully in the fireplace and she knelt before it, holding the book against her cheek. Then she poised it above the flames, hesitated a moment and let it fall where the embers were brightest. She watched the leather and paper curl and writhe until they ceased to be distinguishable, and still her eyes rested for a moment upon the place where they had been.

She rose and held the candle close to a photograph of her mother that stood upon the mantel and studied it wistfully.

"Mother, dear little mother!" she whispered.
"Morris!"

Then with a smile of happy content showing in the soft light of the candle, she went out into the dark hall and up the long stair to her room.

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